

In the capital of Blue State America, a new ferment over homelessness

By [Scott Wilson](#)

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SACRAMENTO — Lorenzo Johnson has a Batman watch and a methamphetamine addiction. He has a pair of Vans and a schizophrenia diagnosis, a prison record and a niece named Jameelah Jones, who lives alongside him here in a small patch of shared squalor.

At 56, Johnson has no home. He wants one.

He and his niece Jones sleep in a tent on a shoulder of 16th Street in the River District, where migrants once settled after their long walk from the Dust Bowl to work in the salmon canneries along the Sacramento River. Those with nowhere else to go still end up on its streets.

More people than ever have congregated in the open spaces here. Johnson's camp comprises about a dozen tents, many teeming with rats. The rodents scrounge for loose food, like the lentils and beans he warmed over an open fire one recent morning for himself and his neighbors.

This is a pandemic of homelessness you see. We need shelter, we need housing. I've just never seen so many families with children on the streets, and I've lived here my whole life.

— Jameelah Jones

Jones has been in and out of prison for much of her life, too. Not long ago she had a steady job as an accountant — she earned a degree behind bars — that vanished when the pandemic began. So did her apartment, which burned in a fire about the same time.

She has been living on this road ever since in a routine defined by small searches and permissions, like the allowance she received from the warehouse owners across the street to fill a bucket each morning at an outdoor tap so she, Johnson and her niece can wash.

“This is a pandemic of homelessness you see,” said Jones, who is 44 and wears a mask resembling a lion's mouth against a virus she is terrified of contracting. “We need shelter, we need housing. I've just never seen so many families with children on the streets, and I've lived here my whole life.”

Here, in the political capital of Blue State America, even the homeless cannot believe how many homeless there are.

The despair and frustration here mirrors how much of the state, as well as many major cities across the coastal West, are feeling about the worsening humanitarian crisis of homelessness. For years, Democratic governments in California have tried to solve the problem by helping finance affordable housing in some of the most expensive real estate markets in the nation. The issue has been stubbornly resistant to the billions spent on resolving it.

But there is something happening here where two major California rivers converge, currents placing Democrats of various shades of blue against each other. One approach is being promoted by the state and local governments, which want to focus more resources on the mentally ill, the most visible and defining characteristic of the crisis.

Another is being advocated by business leaders, neighborhood groups and angry voters, who have watched the expanding homeless population fill in the city's public spaces and now want local officials to force people to accept housing, getting them off the streets. Those who decline an offer of an available bed, of which there are none now, would no longer be allowed to live on the street. The proposal, highly popular with the public, will come before voters in November.

Behind each is the idea of creating a new definable responsibility from local governments viewed as largely ineffective in confronting the issue. Even elected officials say it is time to hold themselves to account in new ways after a year when an average of more than three homeless residents died on the streets of Sacramento County each week.

“From my vantage point, when it comes to the compassion around homelessness, it can be impractical compassion or it can be practical compassion,” said Sacramento City Council member Jeff Harris, a former building contractor who took office eight years ago.

The homeless count in Sacramento was about 1,200 people at that time, and it has doubled several times over since then. Harris's district, which includes the small camp along 16th Street where Johnson and Jones live, is home to about half of the city's homeless.

“I'm getting real heartburn with how far left things are swinging because of this impractical compassion,” said Harris, a Democrat who favors a more aggressive city approach to tent clearing and to criminals who prey on the homeless and other residents. “People are not paying attention to the signs on the street about what's really going on down here.”

Forcing the issue

Homelessness braids together drug addiction, exorbitant housing prices, a history of high prison populations and a legacy of broken promises to the mentally ill — in short, the most pressing social policy concerns confronting the nation's most populous state. A quarter of the country's homeless population — about 160,000 people — lives in California.

Here in Sacramento the last homeless census, conducted in 2019 before the pandemic's onset, showed 5,570 people countywide did not have a permanent place to live. The number could be twice that today, according to advocates for the homeless and city officials, and more than a third suffer from addiction or mental illness.

There are fewer than 3,000 year-round emergency shelter beds in the city, nearly all of them filled each night. So the crisis sits largely on display — in roadside camps, in the shade of the tree-branch canopies of popular parks and in smaller single-tent setups across the capital.

Among those who lived downtown was Melinda Davis, 57, who died earlier this month along with five others after

being fatally shot in what police say was probably a gang-related gunfight. Davis, sweet and popular, often slept in a florist's doorway.

At the same time, a pair of gruesome crimes allegedly committed by homeless residents has shifted some public sympathy toward fear across the community.

In September, a 51-year-old homeless man named Troy Davis allegedly broke into the downtown home of Mary Kate Tibbitts and killed her and her two dogs, Molly and Jenny. Tibbitts, 61, had lived in Land Park, a high-demand neighborhood of young families, Spanish- and Mediterranean-style homes and brewpubs, for nearly a decade.

Davis has been charged with murder and assault with intent to commit rape, among other counts. He has a long criminal record and, officials have said, a methamphetamine addiction.

"It's incredible to me when you look at how many times he was in the system and clearly the system didn't help," said council member Katie Valenzuela, a Democratic socialist who represents the district where Tibbitts lived.

"Maybe we could have stopped this by recognizing early on that he had every symptom, every sign, that something like this might happen with him. We did nothing to address it until someone was murdered, so I think this is just a systems failure on every level."

Then, earlier this year, the body of 20-year-old Emma Roark was found along the American River Parkway, a magnetically popular, lush 32-mile trail system that connects downtown Sacramento with the city of Folsom and beyond. Roark, whose family members said was autistic and frequently spent time photographing along the riverside, was sexually assaulted and killed.

A 37-year-old man named Mikilo Rawls, who camped along the river, has been charged with the crime. He also has a criminal history.

The violence from homeless camps has shaken residents here and across the state. In a statewide survey conducted last month by the Public Policy Institute of California, 64 percent of respondents said homelessness was a "big problem" where they lived, including an even higher percentage among Democrats. More than 8 in 10 respondents said they were at least "somewhat concerned" by the homeless in their communities.

It has also shoved the Sacramento City Council into action. Just days after the downtown shooting that killed Melinda Davis, the council voted by a wide majority to place a measure on the November ballot that would require the city to provide emergency shelter on a tight timeline for 60 percent of the city's homeless population. Failing to do so would expose the city to legal liability, a foundation for lawsuits from homeless residents and civic groups alike. Those most opposed to the idea fear it could bankrupt the city or at least force the local government to find three to four times the amount of money it currently spends on homeless issues within months.

If the measure passes and the city meets its goals, law enforcement would be allowed to clear homeless camps on public land, but only after residents are offered and refuse an available shelter bed. A 2018 federal appeals court ruling now prohibits cities from enforcing anti-camping measures on public property if not enough beds are available to accommodate those without shelter.

Homeless advocates say the proposed measure still would run afoul of that ruling, made in the case of Martin v. Boise, and only push homeless residents with a wide variety of needs from one place to another.

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said, "We understand the frustrations of the neighborhood associations and the business community since we are equally frustrated at the lack of urgency by the city and county to enter into a partnership to responsibly address the crisis of homelessness and lack of affordable housing in our community."

“But this proposal moves us significantly backwards,” he said, “and only will serve to make our unhoused neighbors more invisible than they are already.”

But its supporters — and even the measure’s critics say there are many — argue that more government accountability and a sharp tack in approach is needed to change the situation on the ground. “Clearly the population has expanded much faster than our response, but how is doing nothing different now in any way compassionate?” said [Amanda Blackwood](#), chief executive of the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, a major supporter of the ballot measure.

Blackwood said surveys of her 2,000 business members have shown that public safety is their chief concern, a finding consistent over recent years.

“Philosophies aside, we have 10,000 human beings without homes,” Blackwood said. “What are we going to do about that? What will we do to make sure another 200 homeless people won’t die again this year?”

A new right and priority

For years, Democratic policy ideas on homelessness have cross-pollinated here between a liberal local government and the liberal state Capitol in its midst.

The mayor of this policy petri dish knows both the legislature and City Hall well.

At 62, [Darrell Steinberg](#) has been an influential liberal voice in California politics for decades. He was president of the state Senate before his 2016 election to run this city, which gives its mayor few powers beyond a vote on the city council and a prominent pulpit.

Last year, Steinberg followed up on an idea he first suggested in a [2019 newspaper column](#) that called for the state to guarantee a “right to shelter” for all state residents. What made Steinberg’s a first-in-the-nation idea — and distinct from New York City’s “right to shelter” law — was that he also proposed requiring homeless residents to accept shelter beds if they are available.

Many advocates for the homeless were sharply critical of the must-accept mandate. But the state legislature took up the idea the following year and approved a bill guaranteeing a right to housing, in some form, for all Californians.

As the pandemic gained strength, Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) vetoed the legislation, calling the principle “laudable” but fearing the expense of building sufficient housing to meet sharply rising demand and the potential legal liability that a new right would create. The estimated annual cost of the bill was \$10 billion.

Steinberg proposed something similar in December. But he lost the council vote in the angry aftermath over a city-led effort to clear a parking site used by homeless at Commerce Circle in the River District. The city cleared more than 160 recreational vehicles and cars used by homeless residents as shelter after repeated complaints from nearby businesses.

“My point was that I’m fine with you moving people who are a nuisance to other places,” Steinberg said in a recent office interview, a framed cartoon portraying him as a Don Quixote tilting at windmills during his time in the Senate on the wall behind him. “I’m not fine with moving people who are simply impoverished unless you have a genuine alternative.”

Steinberg has other ideas, too. A few months ago, he began discussing the idea of guaranteeing a right to mental health, the homeless population primary in his mind.

The state's modern history on the issue has been uneven, beginning with a 1967 measure that closed large state mental institutions and ended the forced commitment of the mentally ill into care. The Lanterman-Petris-Short Act, signed by then-Gov. Ronald Reagan (R), was also meant to channel money to closer-to-home mental health treatment centers, a model that never fully emerged.

Since then, nearly every attempt to strengthen the state's hand in compelling the mentally ill into care has walked a narrow line on civil rights grounds. Legislation designed to give the state and courts greater powers has had to be so watered down that it has proved largely ineffective.

Since the defeat of his right-to-housing resolution, Steinberg has considered pushing for a right to mental health, a guarantee that probably would have to be granted by the state.

"Opening one door leads to the other door," he said. "I don't really care where we start. My fundamental point again is no matter how you do it, the law must require us to help the neediest among us."

A different kind of court

A few blocks away from the mayor's office, the state's top leaders have also focused on mental illness as key to addressing one of the most intractable aspects of homelessness. Newsom appears headed to a relatively easy reelection in November after fending off an attempt to recall him last year. His budget plans to spend nearly \$14 billion to address the homeless crisis over the next two years — a roughly fivefold increase from the previous one — in a sign in part of his political vulnerability on the issue.

Much of that will fund ways to increase the state's affordable housing stock. But it is his plan to create a new legal process to compel the mentally ill into treatment that has Steinberg's attention.

The idea, known as Care Courts, would be to create a new branch within the civil court system where those suffering from the most severe mental illnesses could be brought before a judge. Rather than face forced commitment or punishment, they would receive a treatment plan.

Those with the legal right to bring someone before the court would also expand to include not just first responders and medical clinicians but also outreach workers and immediate family members. The proposal has generated significant opposition already from civil rights groups and some medical associations, concerns focused on what has been described as the "coercive" nature of the process and the very real possibility that no housing will be available to those who enter care.

Jason Elliott, a senior counselor to the governor, said the proposal is not another form of conservatorship or forced hospitalization. In conception, the Care Court idea is designed to prevent the need for criminal courts or a conservatorship process from starting against those suffering from severe mental illness.

Those who appear before Care Courts — Elliott estimated that 7,000 to 12,000 Californians probably would qualify — would have their cases reviewed regularly by a civil court judge. An estimated cost has yet to be given, but Elliott said new administrative expenses within the court system would be "significant."

"This is our proposal to address the most heartbreaking element of the homeless problem in California," Elliott said. "These are people who seem completely unable to help themselves and, you know, Californians probably are familiar with this feeling. You're feeling a little bit afraid. Right? But you're also feeling heartbroken. And holding those two feelings in your heart at the same time can be confusing."

Even the small is hard

A curving line of tents runs along the Sacramento River, the state's largest, as it flows slowly through the city. There are 61 tents in all, fenced in from the riverside and from the roadside.

This is the Miller Regional Park "safe ground," a city-sanctioned site to temporarily house the homeless. There are showers and case managers, one to a resident, and a sense of safety that many tucked away in the tents have not known for many years.

Belongings — shoes, bikes, coolers — are stacked neatly outside a few of the tents. In all, the safe ground encompasses 80 parking spaces and costs the city \$2 million a year to run.

As small as it is, even this line of tents was hard to create, sitting on the edge of the business district but still far from sight. The city operates three such camps and each is in the council district of Valenzuela, who has championed them since winning office in 2020 as temporary steps toward permanent housing.

Valenzuela paid a political price for her outspoken safe-ground advocacy and appearance of favoring homeless rights over the public safety concerns of the neighborhoods in her downtown district. A recall campaign is taking shape against her, even though she is not even at the halfway point of her term.

"While people are scared and want action on this crisis, they don't like the solutions much better in some cases than the problem," said Valenzuela, 35. "And that I don't really know what to do with."

Valenzuela was one of only two council members who opposed placing the homeless housing measure on the November ballot, arguing that without sufficient new housing the homeless would simply be forced to move into other public spaces or into unsuitable shelters, a risk especially for women.

The measure's supporters acknowledge the challenge. But they also argue that nothing else has worked.

"We have not had the difficult but necessary conversations in our communities about what it's going to take to address this correctly because it is true that there are no overnight solutions," said Daniel Conway, a political strategist and the face of Sacramentans for Safe and Clean Streets and Parks, the group behind the ballot measure.

"There's got to be near-term trade-offs for any kind of long-term solutions," he continued. "But you know, Californians, we don't trust our politicians, we trust ourselves. That's why we love going to the ballot."

A Sacramento resident and father of four, Conway is a prominent Democrat, the former chief of staff to Kevin Johnson, a close ally of then-President Barack Obama who served as the Democratic mayor here just before Steinberg.

In 2020, a group called the LA Alliance for Human Rights filed suit against the city of Los Angeles demanding, on civil rights grounds, that it take action to house its rising homeless population. Conway was the group's chief strategist.

The landmark suit, drafted by a former Los Angeles city attorney, was settled in negotiations earlier this month. The agreement requires the city to provide shelter for 60 percent of its homeless residents — now numbering more than 66,000 people — in each council district over the next five years.

Before the settlement, Conway had filed papers here for a ballot measure that called for a higher housing target and a tighter timeline — enough shelter to accommodate 75 percent of Sacramento's homeless population within 60 days.

More than 20,000 Sacramento voters had already signed the petitions, half the number needed. Then he changed course and proposed similar terms to the Los Angeles settlement.

The council voted earlier this month to accept the offer and, in return for the lower housing requirement, agreed to place the measure on the November ballot, making the costly process of signature-gathering no longer necessary.

Conway said the measure would still require the city to act within 90 days to provide the first new batch of shelter beds, a timeline homeless advocates predict will simply lead to a series of sanctioned tent camps in public parking lots across the city, not permanent housing.

“We’re going to have to build shelters in many places in order to get up to scale,” Conway said. “But the trade-off is you get public spaces back. And I think that’s what this initiative does in a legally binding way that has not been done before.”

Out of sight

The American River drains the Sierra Nevada snowpack to the east, and as it bends around this city to join the Sacramento, a large park lines its banks.

Stony dredge sites from early-20th-century gold-mining operations mark the banks in places. Chinook salmon swim in these waters; beavers and deer, herons and snakes live in and around its shores.

This is the public land many Sacramentans want back.

The American River Parkway is a wonderland of urban-park planning, a network of paved and dirt trails, boat ramps and rest stops, fish hatcheries and marshland. As many as 8 million people use it each year, several times the number who visit Yosemite National Park. The Sacramento skyline is visible in the near distance.

About 2,000 people also call it home. Among them is Raymond Caldwell, who has either been homeless or in prison for much of his 58 years. Grand theft auto, drug possession — the list goes on, he says.

He and his miniature pinscher, Chase, are sitting in a patch of sun, his bicycle nearby. He fixes bikes for pocket money. He has been helped into housing in the past, most recently a room at a nearby Comfort Inn paid for by state Project Roomkey funds that help the homeless take a step toward permanent housing.

“It was cool, it was my own place,” he said. “But I didn’t follow many of the rules.”

So he is here after being kicked out, amid the cottonwoods, the willows and oaks, the wild turkeys and the many other people who sleep in thickening camps under the natural green canopy.

“This is out of sight, out of mind,” said Dianna Poggetto, executive director of the American River Parkway Foundation, which oversees its programs, promotion and much of its upkeep.

This has been particularly difficult work as homelessness here has expanded, and since February, when Emma Roark’s body was found within its boundaries. Public fear has grown.

In March 2021, a coordinated volunteer cleanup effort filled seven dump trucks with trash, a total of three tons in three hours. Safe needle disposal boxes regularly overflow, the contents at times sticking cleanup volunteers.

Hundreds of fires, mostly small ones, break out along its length each year from the camps. A bill introduced earlier this month at the Capitol would make it easier for local governments to clear parks such as this one.

“If not for county maintenance and foundation volunteers, we’d be standing in a landfill,” Poggetto said. “Why would you want to see one of the great amenities of Sacramento destroyed?”

Caldwell, sun-wrinkled after many years outside, simply likes the peace of the place. He has a long history of post-traumatic stress disorder from years in some of the state’s maximum-security prisons. He isn’t particularly interested in living inside.

“I mean I don’t like being told I can’t have visitors or told I can only see people in some dormitory visiting room,” Caldwell said. “I’ve been out here so long it doesn’t matter. If it gets cold and dark right now, I’d put on my blankets and sleep.”

A neighborhood’s future

There is a wall that serves as the backdrop to a small fountain in the middle of the Loaves & Fishes campus here. Scores of names have been etched into the stone. These are former homeless clients of the largest homeless nonprofit in the city, all of whom have died.

There are the names of a mother and son, Monica and Richard Henderson, who perished on the streets 15 years apart.

“Generational homelessness is alive and well,” said Joe Smith, the nonprofit’s advocacy director. “We can see it on the wall.”

Smith’s past is there, too. The name of a 53-year-old woman named Teri Anderson is inscribed on the wall. She is the mother of Smith’s daughter, born when Smith himself was a struggling homeless alcoholic searching for help.

Smith said he emerged from his homeless life more than a decade ago during a moment of declining health, a hepatitis C diagnosis and a flash of clarity that he was able to turn into a place to get sober, a place to live and a job. Those services were available then, much less so now given the demand.

“It’s so important to capture that moment,” said Smith, a grave yet gracious 53-year-old. “The responsiveness of the system is essential. Right now that responsiveness doesn’t exist.”

You see how hard it is to get even these small safe-ground sites done. It’s like pulling teeth.

— Joe Smith, Loaves & Fishes’ advocacy director

There is housing being built around the River District that may be able to accommodate some of the newly homeless, those who fell out of work, and then homes, during the pandemic and need few other services but shelter.

But Smith said it is nowhere near enough — probably leaving Loaves & Fishes as a chief provider of homeless services unless the local government can find the money to meet its goals under the

ballot measure.

“You see how hard it is to get even these small safe-ground sites done,” he said. “It’s like pulling teeth.”

Around the corner and down 16th Street, Lorenzo Johnson and Jameelah Jones, who wash and eat at Loaves & Fishes occasionally, pass the morning with neighbors at a camp that could be among those cleared depending on the outcome of the ballot measure.

One of their neighbors is James Crofton, who traverses the camp in a wheelchair with a novice’s unsteadiness. In early February, after a cold streak, Crofton had his feet amputated just above the ankles because of frostbite. Several

of his fingers are still blackened, dead of all feeling but pain.

Born in Chico, Crofton grew up with two parents during the early part of his life, a mother who worked as a registered nurse until she died of leukemia at 37 and a father who died three decades later in a car accident.

He has spent 20 years in prison, in and out of some of the most notorious in the state, including San Quentin, Soledad and Folsom. At 51, he does not know where his five children are today. He is not searching for them either.

“That’s not what I want to do,” he said through a thick beard. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

Crofton probably would be spared from any future city camp-clearing along 16th Street because he said he would happily accept an offer of housing.

So would several of his neighbors, cooking, eating, laughing and yelling at their dogs in the slanting sun on the side of the road as morning turned into afternoon.

“But,” Crofton said, “it’s never happened like that.”