

SPEAK-OUT OF THE HOMELESS

Saturday February 14, 1987
City Hall

Sponsored by the Greater Boston Union of the Homeless

TESTIMONY

1. Savina Martin, President, Greater Boston Union of the Homeless

Several years ago, I found myself pregnant, with no money, and in an abusive situation. I met Chris Sprowal, President of the National Homeless Union, at a video release party. Meeting him changed my life.

Your life will change too if we work as a united front to change what is happening to us in this system.

2. Andy Wollett

I am not financially broke or poor, but there are no places to rent. Ten years ago, you could get a room for \$40-50 a week, but now the same room is \$200 a week. Mayor Flynn is just another Kevin White, turning all the rooming houses into condominiums. I can't afford a condominium, I can't even pronounce the word.

I was in Vietnam, and when I came back, I couldn't find any place to live. I've been on the streets for 1 1/2 years, after I came back from Florida, which was too wierd also. I was born in Boston.

Just look at the boarded-up houses on Mission Hill and all the boarded-up projects in Jamaica Plain. Why is nothing being done with these when we know that homelessness will triple within one year? I'm an electrician, I could fix these places up.

3. Ed Paquin, Vice President, Greater Boston Union of the Homeless

I helped organize the Union of the Homeless in Boston. When I started to organize the Union, I was turned out of the Boston shelters. I have talked to other homeless people as to why they prefer the streets to the shelters.

We are tired of seeing people die on the strets. We must look into the housing and welfare situation. Many homeless people get welfare, which is \$41.05 every two weeks, and \$80 in food stamps per month. Or, if you are on SSI, you get \$370 to \$450 per month, but what good does that do you when rents are at least \$500 per month?

To get a house, you have to have a downpayment of \$1,500 to \$2,000, up front. Who has that kind of money?

Everyone blames the drug addicts and the alcoholics. But they are

human beings and they need help like anyone else.

The shelters say you can't do this, and you can't do that.

City Hall says "you can do that," but the next minute they say "NO".

City Hall wouldn't open the front door today for this hearing.. Won't open on Saturday or Sunday unless the Mayor or a Committee is having a meeting. Our hearing they think is less important.

Mass. General Hospital and City Hospital have been throwing homeless people out in the cold and beating up on the.

We need those of you on the Panel to think clearly. Think of the things you can help us do. We know the answers. But we need your help and support. Now is the time to start.

We have asked the city to give us a building we can use for office space, a Homeless Union program to end illiteracy, and give training in finding jobs, job skills, leadership and organizing. They have promised us a building but so far we don't have it.

Eventually this country will have a Homeless Union all over. A Homeless Union is homeless people working with homeless people.

We have carpenters, electricians, painters and so on who can do all the work.

All we need is for the City to respond to us. When they won't respond, we are forced to take over buildings. It is the only alternative we have.

4. Bonnie Nostrum (sp?) (a man)

I'm homeless not helpless.

I've been on the streets too long. I'm not out here because I want to be but because I have no choice. I am capable of work, but people won't hire me because I can't take a shower every day and I have no address.

I do not use drugs or alcohol. I'm as straight as they come. I may wear long hair and wierd clothes, but that doesn't mean anything.

I went to school to be a plumber, an electrician and a mason. I spent four years in the Marine Corps. I seved my time for the country, but now the country is giving me a kick in the butt.

I work weekends, that's all I can get. I make about \$40 a weekend.

There are so many boarded up units in the South End, but all they are doing is building fancy condos and hotels on the waterfront. Why can't the City be building housing? Why not?

5. Steve Haynes

I come in the name of peace and power. I came from England and got married in 1984. Then I got divorced. The cops kicked me out of my house, and I was been homeless for awhile.

But I made something out of myself. Today I own my own business.

We need to eradicate this current system we have. We need to stop looking at homeless people as second class citizens, as rejects. Homeless people can't even enter buildings because the buildings are classified "unfit for human habitation." The shelters say you can't stay here because you are a member of the Homeless Union.

I have a masters and a doctorate degree. But what good did that do me when I was homeless and looking for a job? None, because I didn't have a shower and I didn't have an address and phone.

For that, you are told you are mad. I'm tired of talk. We need to form a CDC. Welfare and foodstamps are ok but they don't make you feel good about yourself.

Today, I own my own business. I'm the proof of what every homeless person here can be if they are just given the chance.

6. Young Mother

I have four kids. I got thrown out of my house and we lived in the hallway because there was nowhere else to go. There was nowhere else I could afford to stay.

There are abandoned buildings everywhere around this city. Why aren't they suitable for me?

I can help myself but I need help from the people here too. Do it for my kids. We should never mess with the kids, they are our future and they deserve a better life. One of my children was taken away from me for a year when I had no place to live.

I got kicked out of a residential hotel because welfare wouldn't renew my voucher.

What we need are buildings and funds to renovate them. What we need is to be looked on as people. The condominium people look at us like trash.

7. Madeleine _____

Welfare put me in a Watertown hotel with my kids. I had to go to court then to review the restraining order. Then the Department of Social Services took my kids away because they said the hotel was not safe for them and they were not eating properly. And they said we couldn't all sleep in one room, me and my 12 year old son and 7 year old daughter. They said that was improper, but that was all they gave us, and then they took my child away.

Now I'm with a group called VOCAL, and we are fighting against DSS and the way they take bad care of our kids when they take them away from us.

8. 8. Leroy _____

Mayor Flynn promised us a building but he didn't come through.

I've been on the streets for 4 years. I stayed out last night too, because I had no place to go.

I took a job for \$40 a week because I couldn't eat.

I'm tired of being treated like dirt. I drink once in a while, but I am still a human being.

We have to take crap from everyone -- the Mayor, the Governor. They are afraid to face us, to hear us.

Two friends of mine died this year because they had no place to sleep. I have to keep warm with the heat from a sterno.

You people have homes, warm beds, TV's, and three meals a day.

We are stepped on, walked on, that's how the homeless are treated.

They would rather see us die than give us a building to renovate. I can paint, I could help work on the building. We have the skills among us.

The Mayor has promised us a building. But where is it? Look at Beacon street, Tremont street -- those buildings are all becoming condos. And look at all the housing in Jamaica Plain that is just boarded up.

And all we hear is "you can't have...."

We will take over buildings until the Mayor gives us what we want. But he wants us to present a development plan before they give us a building, with the architectural plans and all.

Comment from Savina Martin, President

Why can't the City help up to prepare a development plan? And why can't they give us a building in the meantime? We need a place for an office right now -- we can't wait until September.

We keep telling the city, WE don't have the money to prepare a development plan and renovate a building. If we did, we wouldn't be homeless. But the city can't comprehend this. They just don't seem to understand.

We want to turn the building into the Union's headquarters, where we can do training for homeless people. We need a meeting place for homeless people, a place where we can organize ourselves.

A building won't solve the problems of the homeless, but it will be a beginning and a start to the homeless people organizing themselves.

We do have a place where we can meet now for one hour a week -- every Thursday from 10-11, we meet at Project Place, 32 Rutland Street, off Tremont Street in the South End.

9. Loretta Payne

I am a victim of child abuse laws. I've lost my 2 kids -- they were 4 1/2 and 6. The Department of Social Services intimidates parents and tells you they'll take your kids if you don't enter a counseling program and live they way they think you ought to.

This makes parents vacate their apartments in fear. They flee from state to state.

We've seen clearly that Governor Dukakis will do nothing for our kids.

10. Joe Shield

I represent an alternative option for the homeless -- the Community Supported Gardens. We've got a lot of land around that could be used to grow food for homeless people. Homeless people should have the right to take over vacant land at institutions and grow food.

But the government won't listen to me because I'm homeless, I'm not credible, I'm living in a shelter. They say, who are you to tell us? You're a nobody.

The security guards at Mass. General Hospital were taking homeless people out of the lobby which they said was for "legitimate" people. They threw one of us against a wall, and that person ended up a patient in the hospital.

Comment from Savina Martin: I heard about this incident. The homeless people who were sitting in the Mass. General lobby to keep warm one very bitter cold night called me when they were getting thrown out by the security guards. I called the Pine Street Inn and asked if they could come over there, and they said "yes, if they're not barred." Then I called the Mayor's Hotline, but there was no answer at midnight. Then I told them they could stay at my house. Now I have an eviction notice from the HUD management of my project, who told me that I couldn't "run a business" out of my home, and that I couldn't have so many people staying there and going in and out.

11. Connie (older white woman)

I was sitting in the lobby of Mass. General minding my own business and reading when I was told to leave. I said no. They said they would take me out with force.

I haven't had a home since 1976. Mass. General said it was a private enterprise -- the same old story.

I was dragged out by four security guards and one security woman, who was my age.

Are you going to let this go on? Death? I don't want death. Does anyone else?

12. Kerry Martin

I've been homeless for four months. I used to be in the Christian Home of Reconciliation, where there was love and togetherness. We accumulated 2 new houses by pooling our money and creating a structure. We paid our bills and mortgage, and eventually sold the houses and bought bigger ones. But people here can't do that because there are so many different denominations. Everyone is cutting everyone else's throat.

We have three choices. We can put our minds together and restructure what we have to benefit those people who have fought and died for this country. Or, we can tell the Brookline lawyers in three-piece suits to go fight their own wars.

What is the purpose? Why should we go fight this country's wars? For what? And where is our money going?

People are waking up to these problems. They are saying, enough is enough. You will have a big problem on your hands. But you people can avoid it if you give people what they need.

There is so much paperwork that you are dead by the time you get a house.

I believe that we are here alive today, and gone tomorrow. But what matters is how and why you go -- that is important.

13. Dan Satinsky

The Homeless Union was formed last August at a convention at Harvard Divinity School.

People have said it was formed by people from Philadelphia, by "outside agitators." But it was formed because the homeless people here contacted the National Homeless Union in Philadelphia to ask them for help.

The Homeless Union here is struggling to form an organization for themselves. The Union wants a change in the attitude of the city of not dealing with homelessness.

The Union says that the problem of homelessness cannot be solved by more shelters. What is needed are:

- * affordable housing
- * jobs
- * education
- * adequate benefits for people who cannot work.

We are going to see more and more homelessness. We do not want to support the industry of shelters.

The Union has been criticized for fighting for the rights of the homeless people in the shelters. But they have the right to speak up if something is wrong in the shelters and if they are being mistreated. If they are barred from the shelters, there must be an avenue of appeal, and due process against discriminatory and arbitrary treatment.

The poor have to help themselves. This is what the Union is based on. This is what it is all about.

The Union has been accused of being too militant. After what you have heard today, should these people not be militant?

This Hearing today is an opportunity for the homeless to speak out for themselves. There is a great diversity of reasons why people are homeless. Each person has a story.

The solutions to homelessness must come from the society at large. The Union will continue until no one has to sleep in a boxcar, a hallway, or a street.

When homeless people come out from a meeting with the city officials, they don't know where they will be able to sleep or eat that night. The officials all have warm houses to go home to, as they should. The homeless people don't begrudge them their warm houses but say that everyone should have a warm house and plenty to eat.

14. Mel King -- comment from the Panel

Many people think that the significance of today is that it is Valentine's Day.

But for many of us, the significance of February 14 is that it is Frederick Douglass's birthday. He was a slave who freed himself and became one of the most eloquent and militant spokespersons for the ending of slavery. By having this Hearing on his birthday, the Homeless Union has tapped into a powerful symbolism.

Frederick Douglass wrote:

"There is no progress without struggle. The whole of history shows that all concessions are borne of struggle. The struggle may be moral or physical, but it will be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, it never will. If you find out what people will submit to, then you will know the extent of what is imposed on them." (not exact quotes)

15. Andy Kane

Andy read a poem he wrote:

WHEN YOU'RE HOMELESS IN BOSTON

To be homeless is to be left out
To be left out in the cold
To be alone and sad
To be kicked like a dog.

Spinning around like a top that's lost its head
To the tunes of a lone midnight
When the cold winds hit to the bone
The utter reality "To be or not to be?"

All that I know now is to keep moving,
To know the warm stop spots
Bus station, library, airport, train station
A master of transportation depots am I.

When you are homeless in Boston
You play mega-beds every night at the shelter.
Maybe your number will be drawn
So you can get a flop for the night.

When you are homeless in Boston
You become accustomed to writing fiction
On your job applications
When address and phone numbers are asked.

When you are homeless in Boston
And staying at one of the shelters
You are told
When to sleep, wake up, eat, shower.

When you are homeless in Boston
You stop believing in yourself,
In God, in your country.
You become ultra-cynical and bitter.

Then you start saying stuff out loud
In public places or on the streets.
People laugh at you.
You become their entertainment.

Soon the mind becomes a jumble
Of mass fragments that seem unpiecable
For when you are homeless in Boston,
You stand in a phone booth
Calling agencies and rental companies.

When you get the agency, they are polite,

Tell you to come to their office,
Talk, leave -- so much for the agencies.

When you are homeless in Boston
You go to the labor pools,
Work for the minimum wage
Which is slavery when we consider
The dollar's purchasing power.

Troubled and distressed by what I see
And experience as you, condo developer,
Rush off to your next deal, and you,
Real estate man, rubbing your hands
At the profits (after, of course,
You've disposed of the last tenants).

The New Boston, Quiche Lorraine tyranny,
The arrogant wealth of nouveau riche,
Expresso bars and slick talking fools,
Sucking the life blood from the land.

Through this horror
Of real estate speculation,
We can clearly see the life blood,
The Juice, the very soul
Being taken out of Boston.

But, remember, my friends,
Not long ago you started something:
That tea -- you threw it overboard.

Come on now, have you forgotten?

Standing in phone booths
Talking to the wind,
Smoking a cigarette,

Standing in phone booths
Calling for help
Calling to God!

16. Eric Brinkerhoff

We're not crazies, drug addicts and winos.

We don't want yours, we just want ours.

We have skills and lots of time (which is money), and energy -- we get frustrated when we are on the streets.

We can make a house, a boiler, I can weld. I have a brain, and two powerful hands.

People say there are lots of paranoid schizophrenics out on the

streets. People have a right to be paranoid after how they are treated.

But we are not crazy. We just want that house that has our name on the door. There should be one for all of us out there somewhere.

We don't want to be given a building -- we will fix it up. That is not a handout -- that is sharing -- you give us a building, we'll provide the labor.

Every one of the homeless can do something. Many people have skills. If people are too old, they can tell the young ones how.

17. Black man in overcoat

The food at Long Island is not good.

We need more low income apartments, education, training programs, and better wages.

Dukakis spent \$1.5 million on trade with China rather than on the homeless.

Jesus could do a lot to help and said it was the right thing to do. Homeless people need help.

Who can afford \$1,000 or \$700 a month? What about rent control?

We are getting sick and tired.

18. Dinah Polyatta

If people on the Panel here are working as hard as we are to survive on the streets to survive, then we may be able to solve these problems.

I and my 2 1/2 year old son had so many appointments last week we barely made it.

If people on the panel work as hard as we are working to survive, we can influence whoever it is who is responsible for low income affordable housing.

If you on the Panel are people in responsible positions and not like state employees and politicians who don't see the range and intensity of our problems.

We need a dedicated group of hard-knocking individuals who are pushing as hard in their offices as we are in the streets to stay alive.

Shelters are not the answer. We need houses, jobs. Not all of us are educated and trained.

If you want to ask me any questions, call me at the Cambridge "Y". That's where we are for the next two weeks until we're kicked out and are back on the streets.

I went through a crisis period during the last six months. The DSS threatened to take my baby. It took me two months to get situated in a shelter. Two months, with a baby.

I can tell you all about subsidized housing -- all about section 8 and section 707.

I have a long list in my briefcase of contacts I made to find a shelter for Andrew and me.

We found one, but I was so appalled at the conditions there, we went back to our car. I have lots of parking tickets because homeless people can't park on the streets.

The DSS abused my son. I spent ten days walking the streets with no cash because the DSS sent my case back to Lowell, where I used to live, and I couldn't get it referred back here for 10 days, so I had not money. Have you ever been on the streets, with no cash, for 10 days, with a 2 1/2 year old baby?

The answer is to tie in with the Homeless Union and to network. We need to bring the agencies together so they are not all scattered. We need greater cooperation and coordination between the agencies.

How many people have read John Naisbett's Megatrends? I think more people should be thinking about how we can solve our problems today.

19. Arthur Caldwell

I am homeless primarily because of DSS. They told me to get out of my home or they'd take my kids.

Boston spends \$2 1/2 million for snow removal. They clearly have the money. Why spend all this money on snow removal and so little on the homeless? The snow will melt but the homeless people will not.

The City funds commissions, public works, and so on. What is "public works"? Shouldn't that have to do with aiding homeless people? The City should be taking the money from the Lottery and helping the homeless.

Comment from Mel King:

What about all the money at the federal level that is going away from housing and education and to the military?

Resonse from Ed Paquin, Vice President of Homeless Union:

I asked people from the federal government and the attorneys from Legal Services to come to this Hearing, but they all had better things to do with their Saturday afternoons.

Other responses from the homeless people:

We can go to the federal government as individuals, but unless we go together, forget it.

We don't want more money for shelters which support do-gooder social workers and psychiatrists but do nothing for us.

What we need is a pool of government money for the homeless which we can do with what we think we should.

20. Shawn Brennan

We are the real people.

Help us be the people you want us to be.

Is this too much to ask Ray Flynn and the City?

We want to be as real as you.

21. Donald _____

(Went to school with Savina Martin.)

I am upset about the Governor trying to be the President when he can't take care of us.

I wish people could take the time out to spend a night at the shelter, to stand in the long lines.

22. Tony _____

The people they hire to work at the shelters are the ones who are crazy. Not us. Someone at Long Island actually stole my tax refund.

23. Ed _____

At Long Island, one shower has hot water, one has cold, and the other one has no water.

We homeless people have to live in rat infested places because we have no choice? Would you live in a rat infested place? No, you'd have it exterminated. But we don't have that option.

A man died next to me in a shelter one night. I tried to tell the

shelter workers that something was wrong with him, but all they were concerned about was that he had peed on the floor. They didn't care. Next day, he was in fact dead.

When a man has to die in front of you, something is wrong in society.

24. Other comments from homeless people in the room:

I was in the V.A. hospital and met someone who got thrown out of the shelter because he told the council to go fuck themselves. For that, they threw him out, and he fell asleep in a snowdrift, and lost both arms and both legs. And he can't sue the City for that.

What is the Panel going to DO about this? We can talk about it all day. What is the Panel going to DO? What can we do together?

I am staying at the intake shelter and at the city hospital. But there is not food there, no shower, people are starving, there is no lunch or dinner. They serve eggs, toast, butter and juice for breakfast, but that is supposed to last you till the next day.

Closing Statement from Savina Martin, President

To the Panel, we say, you have the power, you have the phones, the offices, the houses, the organizations.

We here today will cling arms locally and nationally.

Give us help.

We are not helpless and don't want handouts. What we need is support.

The Gatekeepers will listen to you, when they won't to us.

We have to end now, and don't have time for more discussion, because it is 3:30 PM and the homeless people have to get back to the shelters and stand in line for a bed tonight.

Submitted by: Jill Nelson 2/15/87

(Note: I have tried to record the testimony as accurately as possible but many statements are not exact quotes and much has been left out because I couldn't write fast enough.)