

Statement in response to “Take back the Tenderloin”

The Tenderloin Needs Help, Not Harm

A Statement from Coalition on Homelessness in Response to Mayor Breed’s State of Emergency December

Mayor London Breed is exploiting the concerns of a vulnerable community in order to promote a “law and order” agenda meant to benefit political and financial interests. This unjustified, and in some cases, illegal maneuver is cause for alarm. On Tuesday December 14, after a misleading flood of media hysteria around crime in San Francisco and just days after meeting with a group of residents brought together by the business group Tenderloin Community Benefits District, Mayor Breed announced that she will be “changing course” and flooding the Tenderloin with police, to among other things crack down on street vendors, homeless people, and people who use drugs. Three days later, on Friday December 17, she declared a State of Emergency in the Tenderloin in order streamline her plans to “take back the Tenderloin.” Mayor Breed’s proclamations vilify and degrade people living in poverty, stigmatizing them as “criminals.” The tried and failed strategy of addressing socioeconomic problems with punishment will only lead to more harm and suffering on our streets, while the Mayor stalls on implementing the evidence-based solutions that community members have fought hard for.

We know this increase in police presence will disproportionately impact Black and brown unhoused community members who — due to lack of dignified housing options — are forced to live out their private lives in public space. The Tenderloin, in particular, has poor housing stock, such as tiny rooms without living rooms, and many residents spend much of their day outdoors. Police have limited tools to address socioeconomic issues — mainly weapons, enforcement and arrests — and they already have a heavy presence in the neighborhood. Inevitably, the prospect of an intense police crackdown on the neighborhood will lead to displacement of unhoused people and sweeps of homeless encampments.

Ask unhoused people what safety looks like, they would say that it looks like having a door to lock, and being able to hold on to survival gear and medications without police confiscating them. Also, safety looks like the freedom to stay: the right to not be displaced from trusted social networks and community members who are looking out for each other. Simply put, expanding policing does nothing to make unhoused people safer, and only contributes to their instability and poor public health outcomes. In early 2020, the number of tents in the Tenderloin peaked at 500, with many more individuals sleeping rough without a tent. Those numbers decreased by more than 70% when 497 individuals in the neighborhood were able to move into Shelter-in-Place (SIP) hotel rooms, where their safety needs could be met, while policing and enforcement did nothing to provide solutions. In fact, none of the millions of dollars the City spends on street responses does anything at all to provide those solutions, unless there are dignified and appropriate placements in housing. Despite their success, placements in SIP hotels stopped in June of 2021 — even though the City was offered full federal reimbursement

through next April — while the ability for folks to self-refer to shelter has been completely taken away during the pandemic. Furthermore, there is over \$100 million of unspent Prop. C housing funds, which would result in over 2,000 housing placements, currently available to be spent by the Mayor. Mention of these solutions, which would bring real safety to so many unhoused Tenderloin residents, was nowhere to be found in the Mayor’s announcements.

There is nothing new about the Mayor’s proposal — it’s simply an expansion of strategies that have been tried and failed. An overinvestment in and reliance on a criminal justice response not only creates human rights abuses, but takes valuable funds and effort away from creating true systemic change. Meanwhile, the Mayor is sitting on various pots of funding for evidence-based solutions. One such strategy is CART — Compassionate Alternative Response Team — which would replace police in responding to homelessness, as the police department themselves identified was an inappropriate response. CART would be a true alternative to policing that centers unhoused people, and gives them support to get off the streets. This is radically different from policing and alternative policing, which move unhoused people from block to block and perpetuate distrust, alienation and trauma. Another evidence-based strategy is building up our community-based behavioral health system. The Mayor is sitting on almost \$110 million in unspent Prop. C funding for behavioral health treatment programs that would be much more effective in dealing with the crises of addiction and overdose on our streets.

As the harm reduction movement has taught us, understanding the harms that can be associated with drug use as a health matter, as opposed to a criminal matter, is the only way to address root causes. But in San Francisco, which boasts of its compassionate provision of services, only about one-third of available Prop. C funds for Behavioral Health have been put to use. In a study we did in collaboration with four universities entitled “[Stop the Revolving Door](#)”, about half of the individuals who self-identified as having challenges with substance use had been untreated for the past five years. About one-third identified access issues while only 11% of those who received treatment were in stable housing following discharge from treatment, and almost all study participants indicated treatment was pointless without stable housing. We know that offering a spectrum of harm reduction services, including drug treatment, works to address substance use issues, yet the system is nowhere near meeting the need. We also know that policing does not stop drug use or improve behavioral health outcomes. With this proposal, the Mayor is abandoning the real solutions our community has fought for before they were even fully implemented, and returning to the failing strategies of the past: policing and incarceration.

In the Mayor’s Medium post, she stated: “*Social workers, clinicians, community partners and police officers will all work in concert to offer wrap-around services at a new temporary linkage site that will connect individuals in crisis to resources like substance use treatment, counseling and medical care.*” We have been here many times before. Linking police with social workers makes solutions less successful. Many people in marginalized communities, such as the Tenderloin, do not see police officers as allies in their personal struggles, and this strategy increases mistrust and can layer trauma on individuals who have negative histories with law enforcement. Police should not function as first responders to behavioral health crises, absent

a threat to public safety. Likewise, social workers should not be weaponized as alternative police. This is ineffective and costly, and causes harm.

Additional policing is not a change of course. Unhoused people are already being heavily policed, cited, arrested and displaced. Sweeps are a regular occurrence — taking place at brutal speed, without offers of adequate placements and illegal property confiscation are all too common. Since 2018, at least 3,000 people have been arrested at encampments for “not following orders” when being forced to move, while around 300 were cited for illegal lodging. These numbers don’t even take into account the 17 other local and state laws used against homeless people for being homeless. Every year in San Francisco for the past four decades, unhoused people received between 10,000 and 20,000 citations for so-called status crimes — or acts inherent in being homeless such as sleeping and camping. Over one-third of our jail population is unhoused, even though they make up only less than 1% of San Francisco’s population. These strategies have been broadly and nationally recognized as a failure, exacerbating homelessness and wasting valuable resources that could go towards solving homelessness. Changing course would mean doing something that hasn’t been tried before - ensuring the root causes of poverty are addressed.

There is indeed a state of emergency in the Tenderloin, and throughout the city. That we have lost over 700 community members to overdose in the last year is an emergency. That thousands of people are forced to sleep on our streets every night, through inclement weather and a pandemic no less, is an emergency. As a City, we need to act with urgency and passion to address these emergencies, and bring relief to those most impacted by them. The old, failed strategies of arresting them, stealing their belongings and survival gear, and displacing them from the public spaces they’re forced to exist in will not do that, and will only exacerbate the crisis they are facing. Impacted communities have fought for decades against these violent strategies, and to win the solutions that will actually help them. Today, as a result, San Francisco has the ability, the funding, and the obligation to deliver them. Mayor Breed is right that we are facing an emergency, and we will keep fighting every day until she stops preventing the implementation of the policies that will begin to take us out of it.