



Written by [Troy Anderson](#) on December 23, 2019

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A Helping Hand

For over two decades, Reverend Andy Bales has been fighting to raise awareness about a human catastrophe of biblical proportions unfolding in Los Angeles — the nation's homeless capital — and throughout California and America.

Known and loved for his daily walks on Skid Row to personally greet homeless people outside their tents, Bales' right leg became infected with a flesh-eating disease in 2016, and doctors amputated the lower half.



Within months of his recovery, the chief executive officer at the Union Rescue Mission, who offered to give his "other leg and more if we could get a roof over everyone's head," was on Skid Row again to greet people, though now he has a prosthetic leg.

A 2018 state audit found California has more people experiencing homelessness than any other state, and it does a "poor job of sheltering this vulnerable population."

Pastor Matthew Barnett, senior pastor of Angelus Temple and co-founder of the Los Angeles Dream Center, a massive facility based out of the former Queen of Angels Hospital that provides beds and services to hundreds of homeless people and families, says he's "never quite seen anything in my life" like the "perfect storm" of homelessness now unfolding in Los Angeles and other parts of California.

"It's just really tragic and heartbreaking," says Barnett, whose Dream Center is one of 120 similar facilities nationwide.

Homeless rates in other states tell us that the problem is not one that can't be remedied, but in California the crisis of homelessness is not only large-scale but also entrenched. Bales says Los Angeles County has a national reputation for "leaving people on the streets."

"We leave 75 percent of the people devastated by homelessness on the streets," Bales says. "In contrast, New York puts a roof over the heads of 95 percent of the people, and only leaves five percent on the streets, and New York has more people devastated by homelessness than Los Angeles."

And the problem is not just one of putting a roof over someone's head: A recent *Los Angeles Times* article noted that 76 percent of the homeless people on the streets in Los Angeles are struggling with mental health issues, substance abuse addictions, poor health, and physical disabilities.

In fact, in some respects, this tragic situation has its roots in the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illnesses beginning in the 1960s and '70s. At the time, reformers became convinced that new psychiatric drugs, which reduced symptoms of schizophrenia and other mental maladies, would allow the successful release of people from state mental hospitals into community-based treatment programs, even though there was little evidence that would work.

The problem has long since been exacerbated by government policies that have made housing unaffordable and have made it increasingly difficult for religious groups and private citizens to lend a



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helping hand. The problem is most acute in California, a bastion of liberalism, yet the policies that have contributed to homelessness can be reversed.

Early Impetus

The movement to deinstitutionalize people with mental illnesses gained popularity with the release of several books, including American novelist and countercultural figure Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the 1975 hit film based on the book, starring Jack Nicholson. The book and film told the story of a sane but socially maladjusted man — "Randle Patrick McMurphy" — who faked insanity in order to serve his sentence for battery and gambling at a state mental hospital instead of a prison work farm. During his time at the mental institution, his rebellious personality garnered the ire of tyrannical nurse Mildred Ratched, and he was drugged, electro-shocked, and ultimately lobotomized.

Over the next couple of decades, state mental hospitals would empty out, but many of these patients wound up homeless as the community treatment centers sought to treat mostly those with less severe mental illnesses.

"At its baseline, mental health is like any other illness and you need a place to treat people," says John Snook, executive director of the Treatment Advocacy Center, which advises states on mental health and homelessness policies throughout the nation. "You need a place for people to get the care that they need for their illness, and California, like many other states, has decimated its ability to provide that care by really eliminating most of its treatment beds. It's exacerbated that problem by really combining a lack of treatment beds with a set of incentives that prioritize care for the folks who don't need it quite as much."

"The most seriously mentally ill are effectively disincentivized from getting care. That's the way the system is set up. It's really allowed the system to fall apart, especially for the most seriously ill," he added.

Experts are adamant that the street is no place to get well. "The longer you leave people on the streets the more they are devastated by mental health issues, addictions, or both," Bales says. "We've not responded to these people. We've believed the myth that people come here to enjoy the nice weather in homelessness. That's not the case at all. About 70-80 percent of the people devastated by homelessness on our streets are longtime Angelenos."

In response, Bales and others are urging state lawmakers to pass Assembly Bill 1040 that would make it easier for judges to order some homeless people with mental health issues into conservatorships, which would lead to treatment that they otherwise might not voluntarily accept.

"California has believed in the freedom of people to destroy themselves on the streets," Bales says. "Even as I appear on ABC7 [KABC-TV] talking about the potential good of having conservators, I'm going to be attacked by the [American Civil Liberties Union] and others because I'm not going to allow people to die on the streets who can't make a decision for themselves to move in somewhere."

"So not only do we not provide people places to go, but we leave people on the streets with no place to go. We don't look out for someone when they can't make a coherent decision to move in and seek shelter."

Worse, homelessness is a death sentence for many: Bales says, "We lose three to four people a day from



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the complications of homelessness.” And that’s just in the Los Angeles area.

In 2018, a record number of homeless people — 918 — died in Los Angeles County “on bus benches, hillsides, railroad tracks and sidewalks,” according to a study by Kaiser Health News, a nonprofit news service committed to in-depth coverage of healthcare policy and politics.

The number of deaths of homeless people has jumped 76 percent over the last five years, far outpacing the growth of the homeless population. Health experts say the increase reflects rising substance abuse and growth in the number of people who are chronically homeless and don’t typically use shelters, meaning they are living longer on the streets with serious physical and behavioral health issues.

Calling Out the Cause

In September, following the release of the White House’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) report “The State of Homelessness in America,” President Donald Trump visited the San Francisco Bay Area, where national media coverage has highlighted open drug use among homeless people, sidewalks smeared with feces, block-long homeless camps, and people with severe mental illnesses walking through traffic in socks and hospital clothes.

“We can’t let Los Angeles, San Francisco and numerous other cities destroy themselves by allowing what’s happening,” Trump said. “The people of San Francisco are fed up and the people of Los Angeles are fed up, and we’re looking at it, and we will be doing something about it at the appropriate time.”

In the White House report, the authors blamed the plight of the homeless on “decades of misguided and faulty policies” — meaning government policies.

The authors found that one government-caused impediment to fixing the homeless crisis was overregulation of housing markets, which increases homelessness by inflating home prices.

The authors estimated that if the 11 metropolitan areas with significantly supply-constrained housing markets were deregulated, overall homelessness in the United States would fall by 13 percent, including 54 percent in San Francisco, 40 percent in Los Angeles, and 23 percent in New York City.

The report noted that homelessness is concentrated in major cities on the West Coast and the Northeast. Almost half (47 percent) of all unsheltered homeless people are found in California, about four times as high as the state’s share of the overall U.S. population.

While many homeless people suffer from mental illnesses, addictions, and other health issues, experts say another large share of homeless people in California are experiencing homelessness for the first time, largely due to the high cost of housing and living in the state.

A recent report by the University of Southern California Homelessness Policy Research Institute found the top reasons for housing loss cited by newly homeless individuals included financial or unemployment reasons (49 percent); conflicts with family or household members (15 percent); break-up, divorce, or separation (15 percent); and problematic alcohol or drug use (11 percent).

“In 2017, in response to a question about reasons why they were homeless, about 50 percent said one of the key factors for becoming homeless for the first time was economic, so loss of a job, being evicted, or not being able to pay the rent,” says Gary Painter, a USC professor of public policy and director of the Homelessness Policy Research Institute.



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“Now that number in 2019 was 71 percent among the first-time homeless, so economic reasons are becoming an increasing cause for why people are becoming homeless for the first time. The trendline of moving from 50 percent to 71 percent in three years is pretty dramatic. We know that people are paying a greater percentage of their income in rent. Surveys have noted that many people don’t have enough money in the bank to pay a month’s rent if they lose their job.”

Many of these newly homeless people are living in vehicles, campers, or recreational vehicles. Of Los Angeles County’s 58,936 homeless people identified during a count earlier this year, 2,748 were living in their cars, 2,360 in vans, and 4,873 in campers or recreational vehicles.

A second reason for increasing numbers of homeless, the authors found, is local and state policies making it “tolerable” to sleep on the streets.

Compounding its homelessness crisis, California has undercut the ability of police officers to enforce quality-of-life laws, remove encampments, and connect homeless people with the services they need to get off the streets. Dr. Ben Carson, the U.S. secretary of housing and urban development, commented on the policies: “Many communities outside of California have developed robust strategies to partner law enforcement with social workers to actively refer homeless individuals to services.”

Meanwhile, much of California has policies that actually seem to encourage homelessness. The *Washington Examiner* pointed out:

In today’s San Francisco, there’s a car break-in every 20 minutes. Public urination has gotten so out of control that the city spent \$20 million to build open-air urinals in different parks — an effort that still hasn’t reduced the amount of human feces, urine, and vomit that can be found on the streets at any given time. And now there are just under 10,000 homeless individuals living on San Francisco’s streets — a crisis that rivals homelessness in third world countries.

San Francisco’s new district attorney plans to do absolutely nothing about it.

Chesa Boudin, a former deputy public defender who won the city’s heated district attorney race [last November] ..., says he plans to turn his attention to police brutality and mass incarceration....

In fact, Boudin has promised that he won’t prosecute these crimes at all.

“We will not prosecute cases involving quality-of-life crimes,” Boudin said during the campaign. “Crimes such as public camping, offering or soliciting sex, public urination, blocking a sidewalk, etc., should not and will not be prosecuted. Many of these crimes are still being prosecuted. We have a long way to go to decriminalize poverty and homelessness.”

The CEA report emphasizes that it’s the political climate, not nature’s climate, that largely dictates the amount of homelessness. “We show that warmer places are more likely to have higher rates of unsheltered homelessness, but rates are nonetheless low in some warm places,” the authors wrote. “For example, Florida and Arizona have unsheltered homeless populations lower than what would be expected given the temperatures, home prices and poverty rates in their communities.”

“Meanwhile, the unsheltered homeless population is over twice as large as expected — given the temperatures, home prices and poverty rates in their communities — in states including Hawaii, California, Nevada, Oregon and Washington State. Policies such as the extent of policing of street activities may play a role in these differences.”



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In a September 18 letter to California Governor Gavin Newsom and other state officials, Carson wrote that the CEA report found that even when controlling for high home prices and mild temperatures, the state's unsheltered homeless population is more than twice as high as expected.

"There are nearly six times as many single adults living on the streets of California as there are emergency shelter beds targeted to them, the highest such rate in the country," Carson wrote. "Leaving California's homeless unsheltered, unhealthy, and unsafe is a human tragedy and unacceptable."

Further, Carson wrote, illegal immigrants are increasing the demand for housing and draining government resources: "Instead of protecting the most vulnerable Americans from the economic impacts of illegal immigration, California has doubled down on sanctuary state and city policies and provided benefits to illegal and inadmissible aliens," Carson wrote. "These policies strain precious resources and reduce housing options for American citizens, especially the needy and those most likely to become homeless."

Fox News' Laura Ingraham recently argued that California is ignoring its homeless problem and its homeless vets and instead is helping illegal immigrants. We learned that California has gone from sanctuary state for dreamers to just being a sucker state for Americans. It just announced a state budget deal that will now give healthcare benefits to many adult illegals, too. Those between the ages of 19 and 25 will now be eligible for California's "Medicaid" program known as "Medi-Cal." Think those homeless people including homeless vets might be able to use that money?

Carson noted that a letter sent to Health and Human Services from Newsom "seeks more federal dollars for California from hardworking American taxpayers but fails to admit that your state and local policies have played a major role in creating the current crisis. If California's homeless population had held in line with overall population trends, America's homeless rate would have decreased. Instead, the opposite has happened, as California's unsheltered homelessness population has skyrocketed as a result of the state's overregulated housing market, its inefficient allocation of resources, and its policies that have weakened law enforcement."

But local policies aren't alone in adding to homelessness. An article entitled "Charity for the Homeless Refuses Federal Aid, Gets Hundreds Back on Their Feet" by the Foundation for Economic Education explains that federal policy prohibits giving financial aid to groups trying to help the homeless if the groups impose standards of behavior on the people they are trying to help:

Instead of simply providing a place to sleep, Solutions for Change takes a holistic approach to solving homelessness. It requires residents to go through counseling, take courses in financial literacy, parenting, leadership, and anger management, and eventually, get a job.

Over the past 17 years, Solutions for Change has gotten 1,200 families off government assistance and back on their feet. But because it requires residents to adhere to certain accountability standards such as staying sober, Solutions for Change is ineligible to receive federal government program funding. As a result, they have foregone \$600,000.

But it continues its work successfully.

The Way Out of Homelessness

The experience of Solutions for Change provides just one more indication that, in combination with



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government policy changes, private charities are the primary answer to taming the homelessness problem.

Ben Carson alluded to this as well, noting that California — and other locales — cannot spend its way out of this problem using federal funds. “The recent CEA report notes that it takes 10 permanent supportive housing beds to reduce the homeless population by one person,” Carson wrote. “Therefore, providing 50,000 more Housing Choice Vouchers targeted to the homeless would be expected to decrease California’s homeless population by just 4 percent (5,000 people). To address this crisis, California must reduce its regulatory burden on housing.”

Carson’s comments, which are in line with other experts, also question California’s current homeless initiatives that emphasize what’s known as a “housing first” strategy. Following that strategy, the focus is on getting chronically homeless people off the streets and into permanent housing where they can be provided services to address mental health and physical problems, but the number of chronically homeless people far exceeds the housing and shelters available.

John Snook says a growing recognition is taking place “throughout the system that what’s been going on hasn’t been working.”

“There is a bit of level setting going on right now of people just saying, ‘What are we doing here? We spend huge sums of money. We have this Prop. 63 tax (a one- percent tax on people who earn more than \$1 million annually to pay for expanded mental health care in California) that ostensibly was supposed to go for serious mental illnesses and it’s being used for yoga or isn’t being accounted for in a lot of counties.”

“That’s part of why you’re seeing these [critical] audits and a real come-to-Jesus moment that is happening at a lot of supervisory levels. Citizens are saying, ‘We have to fix this. We just can’t have thousands of homeless people, obviously in need of care, not getting it just because our system is broken.’”

Rather than follow the build-until-we can-house-them approach, Reverend Bales and others suggest that government free up religious organizations to help the poor and that religious organizations step up and find creative ways to help the poor.

Pastor Matthew Barnett is optimistic that the crisis will help mobilize and bring the faith community together to help America’s 553,000 homeless people.

After Trump visited Los Angeles in September, saying people are “fed up” with this national catastrophe and arguing that years of failed Democratic leadership and liberal policies helped fuel the crisis, he stated that his administration will be “doing something” about it.

Though the plan hadn’t been released as this issue of The New American went to press, it is expected to include provisions for houses of worship and faith-based organizations to play a larger role in addressing the nation’s worst homelessness crisis.

Based on conversations with White House officials, Barnett says he’s hopeful that Trump’s plan will “release the faith-based community” to do more because the current model in California focused on building new housing for the homeless is cost prohibitive due to the high costs of construction in California.

“The amount of money they’re spending just to build 50 or 60 units is so high, so what I really believe is



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there are so many great faith-based organizations, that if they could just get a little bit of support financially, they could go over the top and begin to do things like open up their gymnasiums and other facilities they have,” Barnett says.

“There is land everywhere [that houses of worship own]. These people are ready, willing and able. They can mobilize the faith community to take on this project, whether it be a local church helping 10 homeless people or five. Some can do more.”

A HUD spokesman verified to The New American that the White House is indeed preparing its plan to address homelessness and that nonprofits will be expected to play a role in the administration’s plans. “The faith-based community underpins the community as a whole and the federal government greatly values the feedback we receive from these community leaders,” the spokesman said. “Ending homelessness will require cooperation from all non-profit groups, faith-based included, and levels of government.”

While waiting for the federal and local governments to get out of the way of providing aid to the homeless, Bales believes that churches could do more already.

Bales told The New American that this is a “FEMA-like disaster,” the “crisis of our time,” and it’s time for the “church to step up and be counted among the faithful to address the rampant homelessness [in California].”

“I do believe the faith community could do a lot more,” Bales says. “We could open up our houses of worship for times like these when a deadly cold winter storm [Winter Storm Ezekiel over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend] comes in, and we could open up our parking lots for safe parking [for those living in their vehicles]. Even if every church just took on one family, they could make a huge impact.”

Some institutions and groups are making an impact already.

Safe Parking Havens at Houses of Worship

In order to help the large number of homeless people living in vehicles, some Southern California churches and synagogues are making their parking lots available to these people overnight.

One of these churches is the historically Japanese-American church located in Los Angeles’ Koreatown. Reverend Laurel Coote, the interim priest at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, says the church is doing two things to help homeless people.

First, it’s working with the nonprofit Safe Parking L.A., which handles the security, screening process, and other logistics, to allow homeless people to sleep in the church’s parking lot overnight. About 10 vehicles park in the lot each night.

Second, the church is working with USC’s Students for Students Trojan Shelter, which uses the church’s rectory building for a student-led shelter for homeless students. Currently, the shelter has room for six students.

“It’s working out really well,” Coote says. “Our board of directors met with Safe Parking L.A., assessed the whole thing, and then made the recommendation to the congregation that we would do this, that this is one of the things we could offer. Since I’ve been here, everybody is really proud of it and are glad it’s something we can offer.”



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Coote says it hasn't been disruptive to her church, as the homeless people arrive after everyone has gone from the church at night and leave in the morning before people arrive at the church.

"It's been really beneficial on both sides of the table, knowing that you've done something and offered up your facility to help," Coote says. "Also, everybody has great pride in the Trojan shelter. I'm just so inspired by the students who have made this a reality. We're doing our part to support them the best we can."

Scott Sale, executive director of Safe Parking L.A., says two churches and a synagogue are participating in the program in Los Angeles County, but he expects more houses of worship to join the program as word spreads. Similar programs are operated in San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Sonoma County.

"There are 8,000 faith-based organizations in the county of Los Angeles so there clearly could be more participation by the faith-based organizations."

He noted that houses of worship are concerned about liability issues and whether they would have pay to join the program. (The liability issues could be addressed by local government.)

But his organization raises funds to operate the parking lots, and the city and county of Los Angeles pay his organization to "properly vet these parking lots." Faith-based organizations don't have to pay to participate in the program and may get a stipend if, for example, the house of worship provides electrical outlets and Internet so homeless people can charge their electronic devices and log in to the Internet while staying there overnight, he says.

"Faith-based organizations are supposed to be community minded, not just self-serving within their religious organizations," Sale says. "They're supposed to reach out into the broader community and not just say 'no' to anything that might be helpful, including people experiencing homelessness. Ask questions. Who operates it? Who pays for it? Who pays for the insurance?"

Coote encourages houses of worship to be "courageous."

"But do due diligence, do research, and then be in open dialogue with your neighbors and your parishioners about how this is an opportunity to extend God's care and love to those in need. We're called to kind of look around and say, 'What do I have that I can share?'"

"It's understandable that people would at first be a little worried or anxious about things like having people be on their property. We have a security person on site every evening to ensure safety for everyone. It really is a lovely way to help those who are trying to find a way out of homelessness."

Awakening a Sleeping Giant

Barnett says houses of worship could play a major role in helping homeless people, and this could be the church's finest hour.

"I think the church is changing a bit," he says. "It's moving into more of the social dynamic. The younger generation, younger church planters, younger pastors, are starting to realize that church is not just about Sunday morning; it's about what you do Monday through Saturday, so there is kind of an awakening within the church away from just a big building and having a lot of church services, but what can we do with our influence to make a difference."

"Many people are tapping into this emerging belief system, trying to find solutions, and seeing what



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they can come up with. It's kind of awakening the sleeping giant. There are a lot of people already doing great things. They just need to do a whole lot more."

With a bit of encouragement, Barnett says, he believes many faith leaders across the nation would use some of their "unbelievable buildings" to help the homeless.

"It's more than an issue of just funding," Barnett says. "It's an issue of asking them for their help because a lot of times there is a separation between church and government (we do the spiritual work and government does the social work), but a great thing happens when there is a partnership between the two."

Rather than waiting for funding or resources, Barnett says, the faith community should just "do what is in your heart because the truth is that the people who are already doing it are going for it."

Helping the "Least of These"

Today, as our society increasingly adopts socialistic and progressive policies that often exacerbate problems such as homelessness, prominent faith leaders say it's time for the wider faith community to step up and take on a larger role in helping the "least of these."

In recent decades, America has moved away from the biblical principles that the United States was founded upon, with myriad government-run socialistic programs to address societal problems that the faith community once handled largely on its own.

America's Founding Fathers didn't seek to create a socialistic state when they drafted the Constitution. Like most Americans today, they too were concerned about the plight of the poor and sick, but they didn't believe that government redistribution of wealth was the best way to address this problem.

Care of the poor wasn't looked upon during the founding era as something the government was commissioned to do. In fact, the Constitution doesn't authorize Congress to confiscate wealth from some people in order to give to others.

In assisting the poor, the faith community and American charities have a long and laudable history of success. Government, despite the expenditure of countless billions of taxpayer dollars, has failed in many respects to match the results obtained by the faith community and private charity in helping the poor.

At a time when thousands of homeless are dying heartbreaking deaths on the streets of America, Bales, Barnett, and Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren are calling on the faith community to increase its role in helping the "least of these." "What does this say about us as a society, as a community, as a people who care if we're just leaving those who are dying, who are sick, who are mentally ill and disabled, just out there on the streets?" asks Warren, who recently joined United Way's "United to End Homelessness" campaign. "Friends, this is the time to act now. We are 100 percent committed to this campaign and I want to ask you, 'Are you with us?' 'Are you in?' Join us today."

Image: MattGush via iStock / Getty Images Plus

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