

Senate Bill 918 would address an all-too-common problem: youth homelessness

By Alexis Barries | May 4, 2018



Multiple tents make up a homeless encampment near the corner of Florida and Treat streets Tuesday, March 20, 2018 in San Francisco, Calif.

Photo: Jessica Christian, The Chronicle

For many people at work, looking at the clock means counting down the hours until their workday is done, when they will return home to family, pets, or maybe even see friends.

For me, the clock was my enemy.

Every day at work, I would dread the passage of time. The mornings would be fine, but as 5 p.m. approached, fear would build inside me, knowing I would soon be leaving the safety of my workplace for another night of living in my car.

At 19, my nights were spent in a 1989 Honda Accord. I was homeless.

Why did I experience homelessness? I didn't have enough money for a deposit and first month's rent, despite working full time. I was technically in foster care and had been since the age of 2, after my mother and father became incarcerated. Once I secured an apartment, the foster care system would pay my rent, but until then, I was living in my car, hoping to make it safely through to my next workday.

My story is just one of thousands experienced by homeless youths in California. Some leave their families due to abuse and neglect. Many are rejected by their families when they come out as gay or lesbian. Others exit the juvenile probation system with nowhere to go. Still others have simply lost their jobs and don't have family members who can help them out.

When I was homeless, I felt alone and worked tirelessly to keep it a secret. I wore a virtual mask at work, pretending my weekend had been filled with fun instead of stress from moving my car and worrying that my cell phone would lose its charge. I worried that if my co-workers found out I was homeless, they would think less of me or that I could even lose my job.

Now I know how common my experience was: A 2017 study by researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that nationally, a full 1 in 10 people age 18 to 24 experience homelessness over the course of one year.

That number is staggering: 1 in 10. How can that be the case?

There is no one answer, but rather a complicated set of reasons including mounting college debt, lack of housing affordability and stagnant wages that make being a young adult today harder than ever.

The high rate of youth homelessness can also be explained by the fact that California has no strategy for addressing it, no clear policy, no plan. Years of silence on this issue have resulted in a generation of young people like me, who are hanging on by their fingernails.

When I tried to get help, I was told that my situation was not bad enough to be a priority for housing. Those limited resources were reserved for the chronically homeless and families with children. The unspoken assumption was that being young and homeless was not serious. That somehow, I would grow out of it.

California can do better for homeless youths. Our state is no stranger to taking on the big issues — reducing greenhouse gas emissions, adopting anti-tobacco initiatives and other public policies initially considered impossible and then later replicated by the rest of the nation and world.

California can do the same for youth homelessness and has the chance this year with Senate Bill 918, by state Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco and Assemblywoman Blanca Rubio of Baldwin Park (Los Angeles County). SB918 would end California's era of silence on youth homelessness by establishing an Office of Homeless Youth and investing in programs to end youth homelessness. SB918 requires local communities to evaluate their needs and apply for resources to address those needs. The proposal has tough accountability measures, and instead of creating a new bureaucracy, SB918 requires local governments and nonprofit organizations to build on existing services to better serve homeless youth.

California has the resources and know-how to significantly reduce youth homelessness, but it doesn't have the mandate. SB918 will provide this mandate.

Taking on an issue as big as youth homelessness requires bureaucracies to work together. It requires public agencies to evaluate how they can do business differently to reduce youth homelessness, whether they operate in the areas of affordable housing, mental health, foster care or juvenile probation. It also requires new state investment to address the gaps that remain.

After four months of living in my car, I saved enough money and was able to move into an apartment in Vallejo. While I was homeless, I felt thankful that I didn't have to sleep outside; many aren't so lucky and have been victimized. Others buckled under the constant stress of being homeless and turned to drugs and alcohol. SB918 offers a better path forward, an important first step toward addressing the long-neglected topic of youth homelessness in California.

Alexis Barries is a former foster youth and now a youth advocate at John Burton Advocates for Youth. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at SFChronicle.com/letters.