

San Francisco's War Against the Mentally Ill

by Robert L. Okin, MD

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Last month's violent attack on San Francisco resident Paneez Kosarian, allegedly by a homeless, mentally ill man in front of her condo building on the Embarcadero, has touched a nerve in the city. This is largely due to the public's sympathy with the victim, against the backdrop of San Francisco's tepid and often destructive response to the crisis of homelessness.

But there's another piece of this story that was demonstrated a couple of weeks later, when the Department of Public Health decided to move long-term mental health treatment beds out of Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. It was an illustration of the ways in which the city has also failed to create adequate services for people who are seriously mentally ill.

In fact, many of the actions City Hall has taken over the past several years have cut the rug out from underneath this population. For example, the city has:

It allowed the Sutter Hospital system to eliminate all psychiatric beds at St. Luke's in 2005 and a 20-bed psychiatric unit at its Cathedral Hill campus in 2009. Meanwhile, the new hospitals on Geary and Van Ness and on Cesar Chavez and Valencia have no plans to include psychiatric beds.

- It's slashed the number of subacute beds for mentally ill people with chronic disorders who need longer-term medical and nursing care.
- It's allowed the number of beds in board-and-care homes, the residential facilities serving the severely mentally ill, to wither by 50% over the past 20 years.
- It sat on its hands while the conservator's office lost staff and largely relinquished much of its responsibility for supervising a group of mentally ill people who don't need to be locked up but need help and guidance to remain stable.
- While Mayor London Breed is sympathetic toward people with mental illness, she spoke out against Proposition C, which was designed to fund the creation of thousands of housing and shelter beds for homeless mentally ill people.

Finally, there's the mayor's recent plan to cannibalize the Adult Residential Facility at General Hospital by eliminating 41 long-term treatment beds in favor of short-term shelter beds. One of the arguments that she used was that there were empty beds at that facility, but she failed to explain that the reason they are empty is because of the city's failure to staff them.

There have been some positive actions, including City Hall's action to create housing units for mentally ill people. But these initiatives have been grossly insufficient, given the size of the problem and the growth of this population. Given the overall picture of city government's actions over the past two decades, we can only conclude that San Francisco has been at war against the mentally ill.

Is it any wonder that homelessness has not only failed to decline, but has increased by 30% in the past two years? Is it any wonder that the number of seriously mentally ill people in San Francisco's jails now exceed 20%, making the jail the largest de facto mental health facility in the city? Is it any wonder that the psychiatric

emergency service at General Hospital has become a revolving door, having no place to send some of the most acutely disturbed patients in the city?

I recognize that this problem is complex, but it will never be solved unless the mayor augments her goodwill with strong leadership. She must insist that her departments address the needs of these patients with clear plans, action steps, dates, and a transparent and public report card setting forth the progress (or lack thereof) for which each department is responsible.

At the very least, the city should restore beds in acute, subacute and board-and-care facilities; bring the conservator's office back to life; and develop detailed plans to implement the supported housing measures set forth in Proposition C so that implementation can begin as soon as the spurious legal challenges against it are exhausted.

Most San Francisco residents have not actually inured themselves to the human suffering they pass on the streets every day. They don't want to feel either fear or misery, and they've already shown at the ballot box that they want adequate funding for this population. Reversing these cuts would be a victory for every resident of this city.

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