

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Part 1: WINTER IS COMING

What would you do if you were suddenly homeless?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

PACIFIC GROVE City Councilman Rudy Fischer recently asked, “With winter coming, are homeless persons eligible for Section 8 housing?”

I said, “Some are, but those who qualify for Section 8 housing can’t use their vouchers because most local landlords won’t take them.”

HUD’s “Section 8” government-subsidized housing assistance program has changed its name but not its purpose. No applications were being taken for waiting lists, but that has also changed.

Acknowledgment of the affordable housing shortage led Monterey to recently approve 19 low-income units earmarked for the elderly and disabled on Van Buren Street—the first such action in 25 years—but they won’t be ready for occupancy for about three years. People could shiver away in that time.

Risks Of Homelessness

Estimates vary about causes of homelessness. As high as half, to as low as one fifth, the population of Monterey County is estimated at being one or two paychecks away from homelessness. Poverty is only one cause of homelessness. The sudden loss of one’s home can happen because of fire, flood or tornado, foreclosure, divorce, domestic violence, or eviction because a landlord wants the apartment for a friend or family member.

At 80, I am comfortable, thanks to my generous son and daughter-in-law, who provide my shelter; I could not otherwise live on my Social Security of less than \$900 per month.

If I were suddenly homeless, with no hope of getting affordable housing before winter hits, what would I do? If it happened to you, what would you do?

The Boy Scout motto holds the answer: Be prepared. How? By learning from survivors of homelessness who agree “the first night is the worst.”

The Homeless Leading The Homeless

One woman says, “I didn’t know where to turn or what to do, so I tried to wrap up and stay warm in my car.” Another says. “I was in a daze. I couldn’t sleep.” A man intimates he felt drunk but was stone cold sober.

They concur that being unsheltered is hard on both sexes, but “by nature, man can roam, while woman needs a home.” Both genders drift into “families” that camp together, then disband.

A Man Can Roam; A Woman Needs A Home

A prominent activist for homeless women lost her job last year, then her family home. “I slept in my car in a hotel parking lot,” she says. “Next morning, I went into the bathroom. In the past, I attended meetings and luncheons in that hotel. Now, homeless, I felt guilty and scared someone would see me washing my face and brushing my teeth in the basin. I felt devastated and tried to keep my homelessness secret but failed.”

She confided her situation, and couch surfed with friends until a job and affordable room materialized. “I was actually homeless just one night,” she says, “but it changed my life by giving me empathy.”

Women Can’t Pee Freely Like Men Do



Newly homeless women without cars often live out of suitcases, then transfer to tote bags, sacks, baby strollers or shopping carts for transport and shelter. Men use bookbags, backpacks, trash bags, bikes with attachments and shopping carts.

An 82-year-old woman says, “I nearly froze in my van packed with clothing and papers. It was a mess. I slept in my clothes and used a can for a urinal. Women can’t pee freely like men do.”

Homeless people under 40 gravitate toward tribal relationships. Over 40, people are more solitary.

An unsympathetic Monterey shopkeeper calls the homeless “skanks” and recommends they “forget about surviving and get lost.” Formerly homeless persons offer survival tips.

Step 1: Change Your Address

First, establish an address where mail can be received by renting a post office box. If you become both homeless and broke, try the free technique used by transient workers who follow the crops or “travelers” migrating along California’s coastline.

According to Wikipedia, Poste restante (French: post remaining) or “general delivery” is a service where the post office holds mail until the recipient calls for it. It is a common destination for mail for people visiting a particular location who have no need, or no way, of having mail delivered directly to their place of residence at that time.

Most, but not all, branches of the U.S. Postal Service offer General Delivery through which you can collect your mail from the counter for up to 30 days from receipt.

If you need a street address, use that of the post office. Be sure your preferred post office branch offers General Delivery. Then, fill in your free Change of Address form as shown (uppercase spelling is preferred):

MRS JANE Q SMITH
GENERAL DELIVERY
0000 CONSTITUTION LANE (street address optional)
WASHINGTON DC 20090- 9999

If you don’t know the 4-digit addition to your Zip Code, use 9999; it is postal code for General Delivery.

Step 2: Advise Others You Have Moved

Notify your bank, creditors, doctors, dentists, family, and other important contacts of your new address.

Telling others you are homeless is optional. Giving them a way to contact you is vital.

Smart phones, e-mail and other electronic means also provide ways contact can be made with you regardless of where you happen to sleep.

Step 3: Protect Your Valuables



If you have valuable items like jewelry, documents, securities, photos, keys or cash, store them in a safe place. The best way to protect valuables is to deposit them in a safety deposit box.

If you cannot afford your bank's safe deposit box fee (around \$100 per year), try what a 58-year-old unemployed chef from Seaside did. He says, "When I became homeless, I used a friend's yard, dug a deep hole, and buried jewelry, cash and a vial of gold dust in a tightly sealed glass jar. Instant buried treasure!"

Step 4: Seek Help At Once



Contact County of Monterey Department of Social Services, which administers seventy programs for an estimated 100,000 Monterey County residents at <http://www.mcdss.co.monterey.ca.us> to get your case filed with the proper agency. One of these phone numbers

might help you start:

Crisis (like need for evacuation/ rescue) call 2-1-1. Information on 2-1-1 in California: www.cairs.org and www.211us.org/status.htm.

Emergency (accident or life-threatening situation) call 9-1-1.

(Next week: Social services phone list, food, and shelter.)

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