Epidemic of Foreclosures Creates Public Health Crisis in Oakland

Editorial by Terry Messman

As damaging as the nationwide crisis of foreclosure and homelessness may appear on the economic level, the full human costs are even more grievous. Each month, thousands of homes are lost to mortgage foreclosures. Homeowners and renters are faced with the possibility of eviction by a foreclosed property. In Oakland’s poor neighborhoods, the story is:

- "Rebuilding Neighbors, Restoring Health" - brain foreclosures and poverty as an emerging public health crisis.

In fulfilling its mandate to protect the public’s health, the Alameda County Public Health Department is showing great foresight in sounding an early warning of the dire health consequences looming on the horizon for those in our foreclosed and resurfaced neighborhoods.

- "It’s simple, economic stress creates illness and poor health. Good housing should be seen as a human right and a public health concern," said Pei Linh Li, Just Cause Oakland member.

As a result, housing instability is associated with a greater likelihood of developing hypertension, lower levels of psychological wellbeing, and increased visits to the emergency room. The links of foreclosures can lead to feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and despair.

To make matters worse, the poorest and most vulnerable - those in West Oakland and East Oakland - have been most affected by the bold wave of foreclosures - the very neighborhoods where more people live in poverty to begin with. And fewer have access to healthcare.

According to Just Cause Oakland, more than 10 percent of homes in these areas have faced a foreclosure. This year, and Latino and African American homeowners are disproportionately hit by the loss of homes. Just Cause report said:

- "Many families who see boarded-up homes and ‘for sale’ signs on every block.

But the extent of Oakland’s foreclosure crisis is not being adequately measured in the city. In recent months, the public has realized that the demolition of shadows of foreclosed, unemployment, and homeownership is haunting our entire community, not just the poor neighborhoods of the inner city.

It took an economic downturn to open people’s eyes, that one has caused the collapse of major financial institutions, bankruptcy of corporate organizations, and the closure of coast-to-coast retail stores.

Now, another devastating secret about the long-term effects of homelessness – that most people have never even suspected – is about to be brought to the light of day. Homeless people grow sick more often, are preyed upon more frequently by stress-related diseases, suffer shortened life spans, and die at an earlier age.

This hidden public utility of illnesses in the homeless community is due not only to the severe physical hardships endured by people living on the street, but also the direct result of the emotional trauma and psychological anguish that always accompany homelessness.

Many people have never really thought about what is common knowledge on the streets: Disease and illness often hand in hand with homelessness. Hunger, exposure to the elements, hypothermia, and the hurried and unsanitary conditions on the streets and sometimes ineffective bedding conditions for disease.

Those who work in health clinics for the homeless see their clients suffer stress-related ailments, including pneumonia, tuberculosis, respiratory infections, malnutrition, strokes and heart attacks.

In addition to those physical ailments, another silent and deadly threat stalks the streets, striking down people unaware and unexpected – stress. The psychological distress of living on the streets can directly cause disease and death.

The factors that lead to homelessness – loss of job, eviction, foreclosure, domestic violence, catastrophic illness, divorce, loss of benefits, mental disorders, and unexpected illness – are found in surveys as the leading causes of stress. The fall into homelessness places its victims in double jeopardy. They not only may become ill due to physical suffering, but also as a result of psychological distress and emotional suffering.

Many medical studies have shown the debilitating and even deadly effects of prolonged stress on human beings. People exposed to untreated stress not only experience sleeplessness, depression, nervous strain, exhaustion, and fright, but also can take a physical toll. Stress is known to be the trigger for many stress-related diseases, high blood pressure, post-traumatic stress disorder, autoimmune diseases and premature death.

Homelessness and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

All this becomes more easily understandable if we reflect on the human suffering caused by the post-traumatic stress disorder that afflicts many military veterans.

Their exposure to stress often causes serious mental and physical ailments that plague them for decades. Post-traumatic stress disorder can lead people into a downward spiral of disease; addiction, homelessness, depression, and a level of despair that is life-threatening. Emotional stress can cause decades of suffering, disease and disability.

The stress of becoming homeless is directly comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder. Now that our society has finally begun to become aware of how destructive stress has been to countless military veterans, we must apply this lesson to the nation’s most recent group of economic casualties.

Toxic levels of stress are being experienced now, all over the nation, by those who have lost their homes and their livelihood. Countless people have found themselves unable to protect their family or keep their home from foreclosure, and have watched helplessly as their worst nightmare of ending up destitute and homeless comes to pass.

In response to this public health crisis, the Alameda County Public Health Department and the city of Oakland have bravely chosen to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," as Dorothy Day once described her mission. It is time for other city and county officials to join these efforts.

We should support the Alameda County Public Health Department and Just Cause Oakland speaking out against a foreclosure crisis that is threatening entire communities.

They are fighting against the dying of the light.

Street Spirit

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