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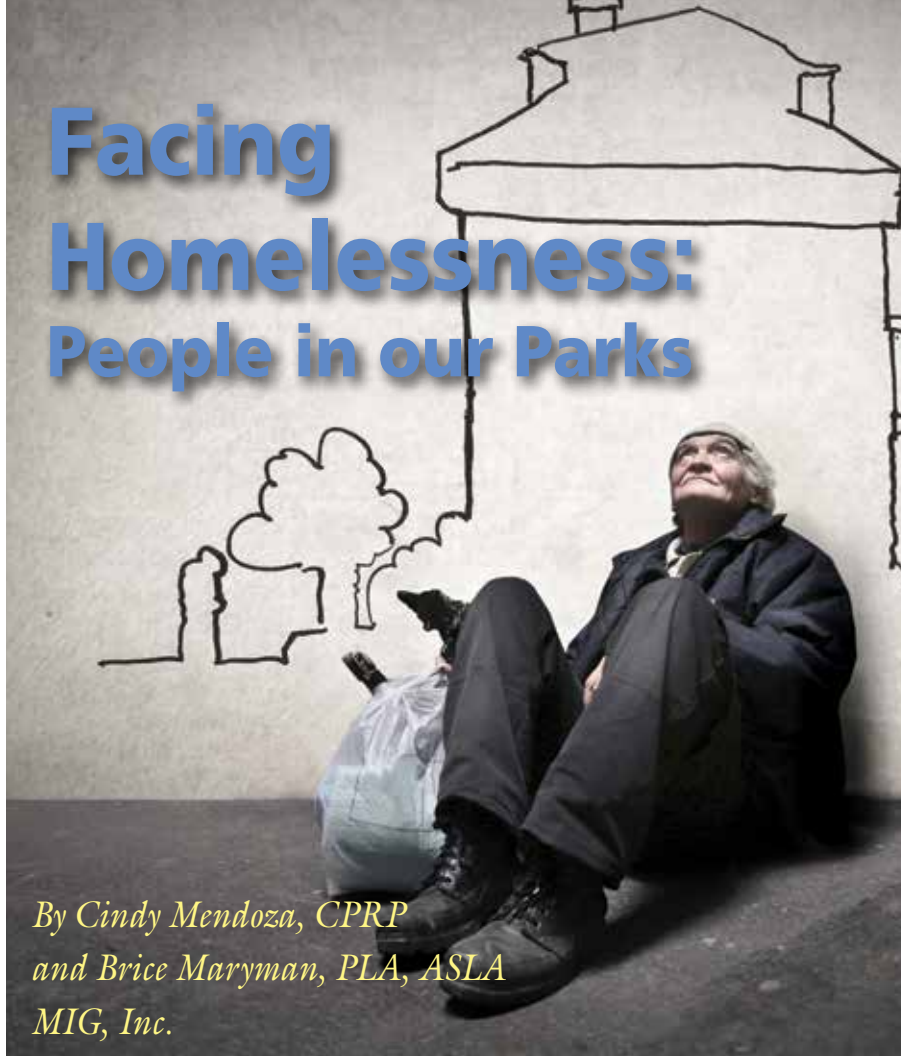
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## Homeless In Your Communities



# Facing Homelessness: People in our Parks



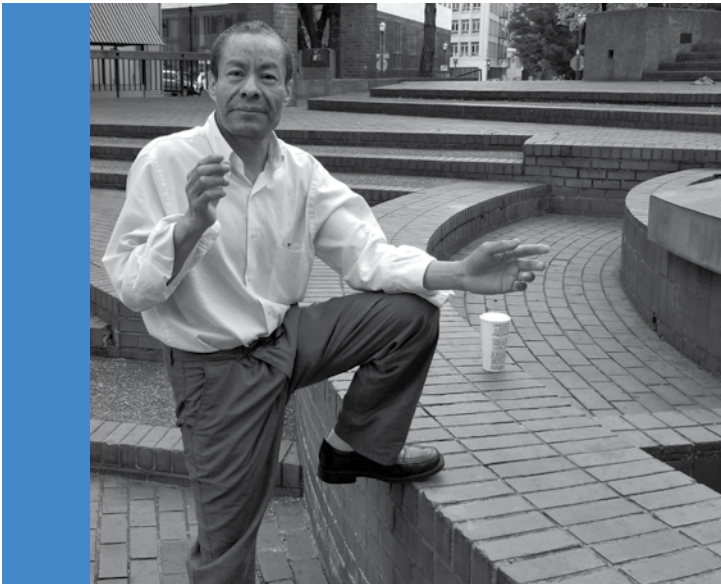
*By Cindy Mendoza, CPRP  
and Brice Maryman, PLA, ASLA  
MIG, Inc.*

Many park agencies struggle with how best to address homelessness in parks. Once exclusively an urban problem, now suburban and exurban communities are having to confront this crisis.

There is no one story of homelessness. Each person got to the situation they are in in different ways and are struggling with a variety of obstacles to get back on their feet. For parks and recreation staff, this variability presents challenges in trying to effectively confront the homelessness crisis. Yet park and recreation agencies are tasked with providing parks, facilities and programs that reflect

an understanding of their community's needs—including the needs of people who are housed, marginally housed, sheltered and homeless.

To better understand the needs of all park users, we interviewed homeless people in parks up and down the West Coast to give a glimpse into their different stories and shared obstacles. Here a few of their stories.



## Mario

### O'Bryant Square Portland, Oregon

**His Story:** In his button-up dress shirt and gray slacks, Mario looks different from the others rummaging through the trash cans in O'Bryant Square. Before him, a man pulled out several containers of half-eaten food and sat down to eat. Mario, on the other hand, is collecting cans and bottles. He's the fifth person to dig through the trash cans in an hour.

Mario tells me he is a violinist from Guatemala. When he arrived in the United States 10-15 years ago, he worked with Los Primeros, a mariachi band that toured restaurants on the west side. His life changed when he was attacked from behind and robbed. They took his violin. They left him with medical bills and no way to pay them. He still limps; he's jittery; he stammers when he speaks and frequently looks around. Drugs and alcohol filled in the years between the attack and today. He isn't sure how many years went by. He isn't sure how old he is.

Mario assures me he gave up the "messy life." Sobriety is required to stay in the room provided by Central City Concern (CCC), a non-profit agency serving people facing homelessness, poverty and addictions. While he would rather live outside the city--where more Hispanic people live, he is here because of available services.

**Services/amenities that attract him to the park:** There are many food trucks in the block adjacent to O'Bryant Square. A variety of people come to the park to sit in the shade or the sun and eat, leaving half-eaten food, cans and bottles. There are eight overflowing trash cans in the square tonight, which Mario checks several times before they are emptied by Portland City staff. He notes that Target has restrooms a block away, but not every homeless person can use them. Every Sunday, a free dinner is served at the square [Potluck in the Park].

**What does he like about this place?** The hardscape, cascading stairs and seatwalls create an auditorium-like space

for people who play music for tips. Mario listens and talks about playing his violin at the plaza someday. He likes that there are so many nice, happy people here. "No one should have to be lonely," he says.

**How could the park be improved?** Mario wishes there was a safe place at the park to leave his bags without someone stealing them. He is afraid of the "bad" people who live downtown. Even though Park Rangers clear out the park at 9 pm when it closes, he thinks the City could improve park safety. Right now, Mario says, "There isn't anywhere to sit at the plaza without someone sitting or standing behind you." More than anything, he'd like a place to hang out where he doesn't have to worry about being attacked from behind.

### Portland Day Storage Pilot Program

In February 2016, the City of Portland launched a pilot program to provide day storage for homeless Portlanders. Lack of secure storage is a barrier in seeking services, treatment, job interviews or other routine daily events. The City provides specially retrofitted cargo containers in a space equipped with trash dumpsters, LED-lit port-o-potties, needle containers and information kiosks. Although not located near O'Bryant Square, the containers are portable, so they can be moved where needed, distributing any impacts. The staffed containers are open Monday through Friday, from 8 to 9:30 a.m., and from 3:30 to 5 p.m. While the containers are securely locked at other times, the toilets are open 24 hours a day.

## Yoseline

**Golden Gate National  
Recreation Area  
San Francisco, California**



**Her Story:** Yoseline, now 20 years old, spent years living in shelters with her family - an experience that kept her moving around and gave her little time to go to parks. “We had to be back at specific times so there wasn’t enough time to go to the park after school.” The few times she did go to a nearby park, she never felt that she belonged; she felt that she and her family were being looked at, judged.

When she was a 5th grader, Yoseline joined the Home Away from Homelessness’s School House program, which introduced her to outdoor environments. Staff took her to parks where she had opportunities to go hiking, rafting, and sailing. These recreation activities helped build her confidence. Unlike shelters, the parks she visited through Home Away were a place for healing--a place where she could relax and “not have to worry about what was going to happen next.”

Following high school graduation, Yoseline applied to the LINC program. Linking Individuals to their Natural Community (LINC) is a summer internship program for high school students organized by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

**Services/amenities that connect her to parks:** In this six-week LINC program, Yoseline and other students assist with service projects in Golden Gate parks and take field trips to special park sites, such as Yosemite National Park and Muir Woods. They do different projects each week, including trail work, tree planting, and habitat restoration. Similar to volunteer programs, LINC connects youth to parks through stewardship.

**What does she like about this place?** Yoseline says she is more comfortable in Golden Gate Park than the parks she visited as a child. At Golden Gate, there is plenty of space and people from many different backgrounds.

**How could parks be improved?** Not every park can be like Golden Gate. I asked her what parks and recreation

agencies could do to make other parks better or more welcoming. Yoseline thinks that we don’t do enough in low-income neighborhoods. In many neighborhoods, parks are associated with drugs and gangs and dangerous people. “For some kids, parks are not nice places.” She describes a trail she is working on with LINC in a low-income neighborhood that is treated as a dumping ground. We can do better. “Any park is important,” says Yoseline. “We need to keep them clean and in good condition so they are safe.”

### Home Away from Homelessness

At Home Away from Homelessness, a San Francisco based-organization that serves homeless youth, local parks, beaches, trails and natural areas are essential locations for programs that help youth gain confidence, build skills and have fun.

Home Away from Homelessness has three programs:

- Beach House
- School House
- Summer Program

The Beach House program offers a trip to a beach house on the Pacific Ocean where children can take a hike, picnic on the beach, participate in arts and crafts and enjoy a family-style dinner.

The School House program offers an after-school community for homeless and formerly homeless youth in grades 5-12. The afterschool recreation, overnight camping and outdoor adventure trips provide transformational experiences.

<http://www.homeaway.org/>

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## Matt

### Beaverton Creek Wetlands Natural Area Beaverton, Oregon

**His Story:** It’s a sunny, 82-degree day at the nature park when I see a young father pushing a stroller on the trail up ahead. Suddenly, he veers off the path; the stroller flips over. He stares at the item on the ground for several minutes before picking it up. As I get closer, I realize it’s a suitcase.

Matt is happy to talk to me, but he wants to be clear: he

is not homeless. At 27 years old, he stays “with his buddy” who lives nearby. He is simply locked out. He doesn’t have a key. He doesn’t know when his buddy will be home. There’s a code box, but the code doesn’t work. Matt thinks it could be because the battery in the code box died.

Matt pushes the stroller across the foot bridge, throws the suitcase on the ground and sits down in the stroller. He stares at the pond. He has scratches all over his arms and legs. There are multiple holes and burn marks on the Portland Trailblazers jersey he wears. He grew up near here. His sister has a house nearby, but he’s not sure where. He has a cell phone and job selling medical marijuana to people he finds on Craigslist. Eventually he notices a bench nearby and lays down for a few minutes.

**Services/amenities that attract him to the park:** Matt likes that this park is within walking distance of his friend’s place. It’s also adjacent to the Westside Trail, not far from the bus stop and light rail station, so it’s easy to get to and from places. A nearby apartment complex has a pool where Matt cools off sometimes. Blackberries grow by the path later in the summer. Trees provide shade and quiet spaces out of view. An old railroad bridge provides shelter when it rains.

**What does he like about this place?** While there are lots of people on the Westside Trail, not as many people visit the Wetlands Natural Area. This place, he says, is relaxing. While talking, we see a blue heron, turtle, nutria, ducks, geese, and an osprey. He knows them all. He says he likes that wildlife, especially ducks, are so comfortable when he’s around. People aren’t that way. Matt says, “I don’t feel lonely when I am here.”

**How could the park be improved?** Matt finds this question odd—and he just stares at me when I ask. When he starts talking again, he tells me a lot of things that seem unrelated. What I gather is this: the park is a haven and the world around it needs fixing. He is glad this park is here.

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## Yusuf

### City Hall Park Seattle, Washington

**His Story:** Yusuf is in his 20s and obviously takes care of his appearance. When I meet him while visiting his friends among the informal tent encampment at City Hall Park, he’s engaging and eager to share his opinions about the park. Yusuf moved from Chicago to Seattle six months ago, he says, with a smile, because “weed is legal here.” Sharp, engaging, with street smarts and still a hint of naivete, Yusuf says he hasn’t felt particularly unsafe in the parks nor where he sleeps “down south” (i.e. south of the downtown core), “as long as you are not dumb about what you’re doing.”

Noting the condition of the shelters near the park, he mentions bed bugs and unsanitary conditions that are unacceptable to him as he chooses where to sleep at night. For him and his friends, this park is their living room; “we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

**Services/amenities that attract him to the park:** In large part, what attracted Yusuf to this park was that it is where his friends hang out and he’s also able to make some money at odd jobs nearby. On the Saturday morning we met, he was also appreciating the volunteer feeding program providing food for people experiencing homelessness. “They’re real nice people up there,” he says appreciatively.

**What does he like about this place?** Yusuf likes the trees and the community of the park, both with his friends who live in the tents, and the “artists and shop owners” who work in the neighborhood. “They come over and talk to us and hang out with us. They don’t treat us as homeless.”

**How could the park be improved?** For some of the same reasons he likes the park, he also recognized that he didn’t think the character of the park would change any time soon. “Kids shouldn’t be in a park like this. There are too many shelters near here.” For he and his friends, Yusuf envisions a place where they can “hang out and do the same things that anyone else does in their houses.” He would like to see bathrooms and a water fountain, but

acknowledges the cost of securing and maintaining public bathrooms would be a challenge, so suggests port-a-potties as a compromise solution.

Yusuf also thought it would be good to have a jobs program where homeless people could clean or provide other services in exchange for spending money.

### “There’s A Better Way” Jobs Program

In 2015, the City of Albuquerque created a jobs program in hopes of reducing panhandling and homelessness. It’s a very simple program: a 10-seater van makes the rounds in areas populated by many homeless picking up anyone willing to work a day job at \$9/hour beautifying the city’s landscape. The job includes lunch and workers are offered an overnight stay in an emergency shelter. Homeless workers are also connected with other needed social services.

The program’s proponents laud the program’s low cost and ease of running.

Opponents state that it’s a temporary fix and does not solve the long-term issue of homelessness.

As of June 2017, the There’s a Better Way Program in Albuquerque has provided over 2,700 jobs and cleared nearly 150,000 pounds of litter and vegetation from over 500 city blocks.

The basic idea of the program has been adopted in the cities of Denver, Dallas, Anaheim and Chicago.

*<https://www.cabq.gov/mayor/priorities-initiatives/initiatives/theres-a-better-way>*





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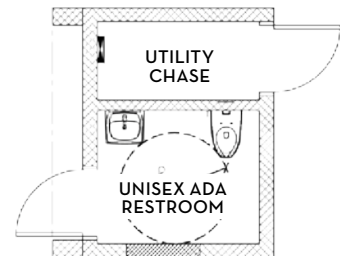
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## Janice

### Occidental Park Seattle, Washington



**Her Story:** When her son became involved with the legal and mental health system, Janice moved to Seattle, “a city I really knew nothing about,” to support and be an advocate for him. In making that move, she became homeless and began living in Seattle’s shelter system where she could be closer to the judges, prosecutors and legal advocates who were determining her son’s future.

Janice is warm and friendly. Several homeless men came by during our conversation to vouch for her kindness. Bright and articulate, Janice sees herself as a “voice for the voiceless” both her son and the other members of the homeless community.

**Services/amenities that attract her to the park:** For Janice, the Occidental Park is a nice place to sit and visit with friends. She also appreciates that good Samaritans will often come by and hand out food and water to those who need it. She feels safe because the park is monitored by “friendly staff,” and while some people will need interventions—she mentions a woman with mental health issues that was “off her meds” just that morning—by and large the park is a nice, peaceful place to sit and talk to a variety of people.

**What does she like about this place?** Sitting in Occidental Park, she appreciates its beauty and how many people of all walks of life are out enjoying the many things to do. “There’s ping pong, all these tables and chairs, jenga, a reading area, cornhole, and,” pointing behind her, “these new basketball hoops.”

**How could the park be improved?** She does note that it is hard to find a place with a bathroom. She’s been lucky to use an adjacent business’s restroom, but says it’s harder for men who have to buy food with money they likely don’t have in order to use a business’s restroom.

As much as she liked the park, Janice also deeply cared about how the park was maintained and offered some critiques of the operations and maintenance procedures. She wished there was a way to train and employ homeless people to clean the park “the right way” using natural solutions and “scrubbing things,” not just hosing them down.

This issue of cleanliness also caused Janice to reflect on her own situation. She had several reusable grocery bags around her with her belongings in them. She wished for a place to store those belongings during the day, because the shelter did not allow her to keep them there. She couldn’t even ask one of her friends to watch her stuff at the shelter, she said, so a public place to store these few belongings would help her go to work and maintain a tidy appearance.

### Downtown Park Activation

Though only blocks apart, Seattle’s City Hall Park and Occidental Park could not feel more different. Part of the success of Occidental Park is a unique public-private partnership for downtown park activation where the city and the downtown business improvement district work together to activate this public space. Rather than driving the homeless out, as some human service advocates feared, these programming improvements have, by in large, received rave reviews by making it safe and welcoming for all people to enjoy the parks.

Learn more by visiting <https://downtownseattle.org/programs-and-services/parks-and-public-spaces/#!about/c15he>

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## Conclusion

As one of NRPA’s three pillars, the idea of social equity challenges parks staff to reach out to their most vulnerable populations to ensure that all people have access to the benefits of local parks and recreation.

By engaging with face-to-face conversations with members of your community who are experiencing homelessness, a new conversation can be framed around how best to address overall community needs. This conversation may drive new strategies and tactics for the design, management and planning of these spaces. For example:

- How should park agencies store possessions left in parks and re-connect people with their belongings?
- Can recreation centers be used as emergency shelters at night?

- How can park and recreation departments facilitate meal programs offered by non-profits?
  - Can agencies provide “pit-stop” restrooms at parks, including portable showers, used needle receptacles and staff to connect people to social services?
  - Can targeted programming better serve the needs of all members of the community?
  - How can homeless residents be included in park needs assessments and outreach?
  - Can park design bridge the gap between users who are experiencing homelessness and those that are housed?
- Collectively, we are in this conversation together, and the balanced

solutions that emerge will be based on active, empathetic listening to all members of our communities.

*Cindy Mendoza, CPRP, and Brice Maryman, PLA, ASLA, work for MIG, Inc. Maryman currently has a fellowship from the Landscape Architecture Foundation exploring the intersection of homelessness and public space. You can find his podcast, HomeLand Lab, on iTunes. We appreciate the contributions of our colleague, Joan Chaplick, AICP, to this article, as well as the insights shared by our interviewees.*

## Unique Programs Helping the Homeless

**Home Away from Homelessness** - (see page 24)

**Safe Parking Pilot Program in Los Angeles City** – provide people who live in their cars a secure place to park overnight. The program is still in its infancy. The idea is to provide homeless people with vehicles an alternative place to park other than residential community streets.

**SXSW Pop Up Village** – offers food, showers, haircuts, manicures, makeovers, arts and crafts.

<http://kut.org/post/pop-village-provides-food-haircuts-and-other-services-austins-homeless-during-sxsw>



**Sanctioned Encampments** – “Compassionate Communities” is a program in Oakland that creates a space for tent encampments in an area with city services and includes portable toilets, washing stations and routine stops by health vans.

<https://sfhomelessproject.com/if-the-definition-of-insanity-is-doing-the-same-thing-over-and-over-again-and-expecting-different-d91b33b12ce4>

**Helping Hands Programs** – Counselors and social workers working alongside police. -

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-social-worker-in-the-cop-car/>

**Rides to Beds** – provide transportation to connect homeless to shelters

**Using maritime ships (cruise ships or military ships as temporary housing)** -

<http://www.businessinsider.com/greg-gopman-san-francisco-homeless-cruise-ship-2017-6>

**Mobile Hot Showers** – Orange Sky laundry service in Australia, Lava Mae and Encast all offer mobile vans with cleaning facilities for the Homeless to use to take showers and get fresh clothes.

**Potter’s Lane** - Using shipping containers to create housing for homeless veterans.

<https://www.afhusa.org/potterslane.php>