

NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

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United Nations: Sacramento is Violating Human Rights of Homeless Persons

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – In an unprecedented letter to Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, the United Nations has delivered a clear message: by not providing sanitation and safe drinking water, the city is violating the human rights of homeless persons.

The letter, sent by UN Special Rapporteur Catarina de Albuquerque, cites targeted closings of public restrooms, decommissioning of water fountains, and a lack of other clean water sources as blatant violations.

“The United States, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, must ensure that everyone [has access] to sanitation which is safe, hygienic, and secure [...] and which provides privacy and ensures dignity,” Albuquerque wrote.

She notes that the short-term solution is to ensure access to clean restrooms and drinking water, including during the night, but that ensuring adequate housing for homeless persons must be the long-term goal.

“The UN has delivered a powerful message: the U.S. doesn’t get a free pass on its human rights violations. Sacramento must take immediate steps to address the needs of its homeless population,” said Eric Tars, human rights program director at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (the Law Center). “Access to water and sanitary facilities is one of the most fundamental of human rights – essential to everyone’s health, dignity, and continued life.”

Albuquerque visited Sacramento in February 2011, as part of a fact-finding mission organized by the Law Center and Sacramento-based Safe Ground and Legal Services of Northern California. She heard direct testimony from homeless campers, who are forced to rely on makeshift privy systems to deal with privacy and human waste issues.

“Nobody wants to have to go to the bathroom outdoors,” Safe Ground member and homeless camper Tim Buckley said. “Imagine your mother in this situation. Wouldn’t you want her to access water and sanitation?”

In a [report](#) issued to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Albuquerque states that failure to provide homeless persons access to water and sanitary facilities “could [...] amount to cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment.”

“No government should use access to life-sustaining services as a weapon to stigmatize and discourage the behavior of homeless people. We intend to hold Sacramento accountable to human rights standards,” Tars said.

Tomorrow at Sacramento’s City Hall Courtyard, Safe Ground and its local allies will hold a press conference and demonstration of the third-world style “two buckets and a bike” sanitation system currently used by homeless campers. Details follow:

When: Tuesday, February 7, 2012, 10:00 am PST

Where: City Hall Courtyard, 915 “I” Street, Sacramento, CA 95814

Who: Speakers include:

Tim Buckley, homeless camper who acted as the camp ‘sanitation technician’
Colin Bailey, Legal Services of Northern California
Sister Libby Fernandez, Sacramento Loaves & Fishes
Paula Lomazzi, Sacramento Homeless Organizing Committee
Jeannie Williams, homeless camper
Steve Watters, SafeGround Sacramento

Why: To urge the Sacramento Mayor and City Council to immediately provide safe water and sanitation to homeless persons.

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The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty is a leader in the movement to end and prevent homelessness. It works to achieve this through advocacy, public education, and impact litigation.