



SEASON 5 EPISODE 6

Punished and Persecuted for Being Unhoused, Part 2

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the city of Los Angeles moved thousands of unhoused people into hotel rooms. The program, called Project Roomkey, was a temporary safety net during the national health emergency. But participants soon nicknamed it “Project No Key” because they felt more incarcerated than housed. Reporter Mark Betancourt chronicles their experience in part two of our series on how homelessness is criminalized.

Mitzi Miller:

I am Mitzi Miller. This is 70 Million. [More than a quarter](#) of the people experiencing homelessness in the US live in California. Nowhere is the unhoused crisis more visible than in the city of Los Angeles where almost [30,000 people camp out on sidewalks and in parks](#) every night. But [living in many public spaces is a crime](#) and the city deploys law enforcement officers and [sanitation workers to roust or evict people from their encampments](#), while homeless services workers try to connect them with housing. Some [city officials say the system is working](#), people are getting into housing. Others who once lived unhoused, like Will Sens, say the system is rigged to look like it's working and claim some of the housing feels less like home and more like jail.

Will Sens:

They're not seeing the [carcerality in the system](#) because they haven't experienced it, they can't sense it, they can't smell it.

Miller:

In part one of a two-part episode, Mark Betancourt told the story of a group of unhoused people in Los Angeles who rode out the first year of the pandemic by building a community in Echo Park. Residents in the surrounding neighborhood organized against it and successfully lobbied city officials. The city forced the unhoused people living in the park to leave. In part two, Mark looks into where they went.

Protesters:

Housing is a human right. [Housing is a human right.](#)

Mark Betancourt:

In late March of 2021, after [400 police officers squared off](#) against [hundreds of protestors](#) at Echo Park, and the last unhoused residents left their lakeside encampment, activists and unhoused residents called foul. They said Los Angeles City council member Mitch O'Farrell had cided with housed residents who complained about the camp and that he'd moved unhoused people into temporary housing just to get them out of sight. Council member O'Farrell declined my request for an interview, but at a [press conference](#) on the day the park closed, he described the operation as a victory in the war against homelessness.

Mitch O'Farrell:

Where we have had a very successful housing operation that began in January. Since that time...

Betancourt:

He touted the operation as a model for [how to preserve public spaces](#) while getting unhoused people on a path to a better life. He even campaigned for reelection on it. [Here's one of his campaign ads](#).

Mitch O'Farrell Campaign Ad:

Residents know Echo Park Lake is safe, clean, and restored. Children and parents have a safe green space. Wildlife has returned to their healthy habitats and crime has essentially dropped to zero. And most importantly, transitional housing, services and dignity were provided to the unhoused. If you respect the welfare of the unhoused and believe working families deserve safe, clean, public spaces, cast your vote for Mitch O'Farrell.

Betancourt:

The city spent over a million dollars to restore and repair the park after removing the encampment. According to O'Farrell's office, sanitation workers collected 35 tons of garbage while some unhoused residents who were pushed out said that so-called garbage was their belongings. They hadn't been allowed to take it all with them when the park was closed. Crime did drop to zero in the park for a couple of months after it was cleared. But during that time, the park was [surrounded by a chain link fence](#) and closed to the public. After the park reopened, crime went back up, though not to the same level as when the encampment was there. The housing claim, that's complicated too.

Ashley Bennett:

This notion of people were taken from the park into housing, is just simply not true.

Betancourt:

[Ashley Bennett](#) is an organizer with [Ground Game LA](#). She was involved from the beginning of the Echo Park Lake encampment. She helped organize protests to stop the city from clearing the camp, which she calls blockades, and she was there at the end helping unhoused people figure out where they could go when the city finally closed the park.

Bennett:

What we'd been asking for from the beginning of the blockades was hotel rooms. The asks that we were making prior had fallen upon deaf ears, but then there was a new group of housed residents, called [Friends of Echo Park Lake](#), who started emailing and calling in and having meetings about needing to have people removed from the park. And shortly after that group started gaining traction and going to city council meetings and appealing to Mitch O'Farrell, the rooms finally started being offered.

Betancourt:

The city was offering hotel rooms as part of [Project Room Key](#). It was [funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), FEMA, and the goal was to get unhoused people who were especially vulnerable to COVID-19 indoors, where they'd be better protected from infection. The city referred to it as [interim housing](#), a safe place to sleep while waiting for permanent housing. And the program got a lot of people indoors, with more than [10,000 participants in the first two years of the pandemic](#). But only about [40%](#)

[of those participants](#) moved from the program into permanent housing. The city offered the rest other forms of interim housing, including shelters. Outreach workers flooded Echo Park, offering temporary housing to the people living there. At the same time, it was clear the city was not going to let them stay in the park.

Wall Street:

Police officers would drive around and they would drive in the park on the grass and make their rounds and tell people "You can't be here. You can't be here."

Betancourt:

Cesar Segura, who goes by Wall Street, was one of the unhoused residents who helped build the Echo Park encampment.

Wall Street:

A lot of people got scared and they thought Project Room Key was a solution, at least a temporary solution for them.

Betancourt:

Wall Street and his wife, Jessica Mendez, who goes by Queen, had heard that there were [strict rules in the Project Room Key hotels](#). They worried they were being pushed into an unstable situation.

Queen:

There was a moment where I considered it, especially the days had gone on with no sleep, with the constant pounding, with the constant lights, with the constant helicopters. The people that were coming in to give us services like shoes, socks, food weren't coming anymore. The vendors weren't showing up anymore, so they literally kind of bottlenecked us into either making a decision or leaving the park.

Betancourt:

Queen is undocumented. She didn't see how she could qualify for a permanent housing program if she didn't have a social security number. So she and Wall Street decided to stick it out in the park. If you haven't heard their story, we recommend you go back and listen to part one of this episode. It turned out that what Queen and Wall Street were concerned about, that [Project Room Key would be a dead end](#), ended up happening to a lot of people from the park. Will Sens and his girlfriend Sarah had been living in the park for months. When outreach workers offered them temporary housing, they jumped at the chance. I spoke to Will in July of 2022. At that point, he and Sarah had been living in a hotel room in Project Room Key for a year and a half. Like everyone who has experienced homelessness, Will came to it in a specific way and the experience shaped who he is.

Sens:

I grew up in Calvert County, Maryland, in Chesapeake Beach on the Chesapeake Bay.

Betancourt:

I met Will in the parking lot out back of the restaurant where he washes dishes. He's 45 with youthful looks that belie his short silver hair.

Sens:

I grew up in a Jehovah's Witness household. I was about 22, 23, I decided not to be a Jehovah's Witness anymore and that began my first foray into the world of being homeless. It was really scary. The whole thing was scary because I was suddenly without anyone, without my family. From that experience, from those years of being on the road and on the street, it set me up to be prepared to be on the street at a moment's notice, just mentally. I've been living out of a backpack since that time, basically. I mean, even when I've been indoors, it's like everything's just kind of set up in a way that if (censored) goes down that I have my stuff and I can just bounce if I need to. This is ingrained in me at this point.

Betancourt:

Will ended up moving to LA. In 2020, he was working at another restaurant, living in an office space rented by friends. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, like many people, Will lost his job, then his housing. So he lived on the street.

Sens:

I'm good at hiding myself. There's like a certain kind of situation that I look for to set up for the night. A dark street, I would curl up around a tree beside a car and it's covers enough angles that the cops would never see me there. I usually didn't set up a tent. If I do, I will get a one-man tent that's really quick to put up and take down and just [inaudible 00:09:56] put it fast and then I'm on my way.

Betancourt:

Will says he normally wouldn't have set up in an encampment. He didn't trust other people. But Echo Park would turn out to be different.

Sens:

I had a friend that was staying at Echo Park and I would go and visit him. There was always people coming through with food and there's always bathrooms there and water. So I would go there at least a couple of times a week, two or three times a week, just to get something to eat. Also, I had Sarah with me by that time.

Betancourt:

Will's girlfriend, Sarah, has a health condition that affects her liver. He says they decided to move into Echo Park full-time because it was healthier for her there.

Sens:

And we had a tent and everything, so it was better for her to be stabilized in a spot than to be wandering around with the cart.

Betancourt:

When outreach workers started coming to the park in late 2020 offering hotel rooms with Project Room Key, it was a no-brainer. Sarah clearly qualified.

Sens:

She needed to get inside. She has underlying health conditions and I wanted to get her off the street. She was just like not doing well. You have to be healthy to live on the street, and stay healthy, really. Things can go bad really fast.

Betancourt:

Will says the outreach workers weren't just offering rooms to people who qualified.

Sens:

They told us to claim that we had some kind of ailment to make sure that we did that so that we could get in. They said, "You're going to have to say something to get into this place because actually, it's for people that are sick or elderly. So you're going to have to tell them something." And I told them I have asthma, which is true.

Betancourt:

Will and Sarah signed up for a Project Room Key room. All they knew was that they'd be getting inside. They didn't know how long they'd be able to stay or whether they'd be able to move from the hotel into permanent housing. When the bus came to pick them up from Echo Park, Will said he didn't even know where it was going. It headed downtown and dropped them off at the LA Grand Hotel, only a few minutes from the park they'd just left. [LAHSA](#), the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, had temporarily bought out the entire hotel and contracted with the Salvation Army to run the Project Room Key program there. To get into the hotel, Will, Sarah and the other new arrivals had to go through a security checkpoint in the lobby.

Sens:

They looked through our things and they used the metal detector wand on us. Yeah.

Betancourt:

What are they looking for?

Sens:

Weapons and drugs.

Betancourt:

Before the Grand closed to travelers to become a Project Room Key site, it was a four-star hotel with a pool, a restaurant, and room service. Not surprisingly, those amenities were not available to participants in Project Room Key. Even so, Will says he had no complaints about the room.

Sens:

I was happy to be inside. It's nice to have a shower. And I found out later that we had a really good room, honestly. A lot of the rooms don't have tubs. Ours does.

Betancourt:

But there were other aspects of life at the Grand that he quickly discovered were not easy to deal with. There was a curfew. All participants [had to be inside the hotel by 7:00 PM or they'd be locked out](#).

Sens:

It was not feasible for most people to be in by 7:00 if you want to keep a job, if you want to have any kind of life.

Betancourt:

Many people who didn't make curfew ended up having to spend the night on the street. Will says there was a list for people who needed to come in late because of their jobs, but the guards would often forget to put people on it.

Sens:

Just [disorganization and chaos](#).

Betancourt:

They [weren't allowed to have visitors](#), not even from other rooms inside the hotel, and there was [no congregating in the common spaces](#).

Sens:

I got in trouble for talking to my friend in the hallway. We were walking down the hall together talking and they made us stop talking and told us that they were going to write us up if we didn't stop talking.

Betancourt:

Project Room Key participants didn't actually get a key to their rooms. They had to ask the program staff for permission to be let in. Residents started calling it [Project No Key](#). The staff could enter the rooms. They had to do a temperature check on all participants three times a day to guard against COVID outbreaks. But residents complained that [staff came into their rooms when they were sleeping or in the shower](#). Participants also couldn't have anything in their rooms that [could be used as a weapon](#).

Sens:

People can't have their tools in their rooms. You can't have scissors. The tools has been a big issue because a lot of people can't do the jobs... They can't do their jobs because their tools will be confiscated. So it's like this extra stress constantly. The going notion seems, in public's mind, is, "Oh, they're taken care of. They're in the hotel, everything's fine." But there are all these fiery hoops that you have to jump through and you're biting your nails and... anxiety stress because you never know where the (censored) is going to come from.

Betancourt:

The constant stress takes a toll.

Sens:

It's enough to make anybody angry, (censored) off and crazy, to have somebody saying, "No, you can't go in your room right now," or, "You can't come out of your room. You can't leave the hotel. You can't come in the hotel. You can't get your bike. Your bike goes over here today, not over there. You can't stand here. Go stand over there." It sounds and feels just like being on the street. "You can't be here."

Betancourt:

Will says one of the hardest parts about living in Project Room Key is the [constant threat of being terminated](#). That's what Room Key staff call it when you break the rules and they kick you out. It's also called being exited.

Sens:

If they say that you can't leave your room or you'll be exited from the program, you can't leave your room.

Betancourt:

Will and other Room Key participants have said that [the staff seem to be making up some of the rules as they go along](#), throwing participants into a constant state of uncertainty. I talked to a woman named Mama C.A.T. Her initials are C.A.T. and she's always cooking for people, so Mama C.A.T. She lived in a Project Room Key hotel called [the Mayfair](#), not far from the Grand.

Mama C.A.T.:

I needed a special diet. They couldn't provide it and so I had a little tiny knife and I was making vegetables and the guards were my friends, so they were like, "They went and searched your room, they found a little pocket knife," and wrote me up. It's like an epic of trying to exit me.

Betancourt:

The Mayfair was run by a non-profit called Helpline Youth Counseling. When Mama C.A.T. went to ask some of the staff why she was being written up for having a pocket knife, she knew they'd push back. [So she filmed it on her phone](#).

Mama C.A.T.:

.... that's about, because it's just a small knife.

Mayfair Staff Member 1:

Yeah, you can't have that.

Mama C.A.T.:

It was in there... Well, how am I supposed to cut my vegetables and feed myself? You guys don't feed us properly.

Mayfair Staff Member 2:

A plastic knife.

Mama C.A.T.:

I can't cut a potato with a plastic knife. I would like to speak to LAHSA about it cause I want this resolved.

Mayfair Staff Member 2:

Take it with you...

Mayfair Staff Member 1:

And don't film me. Stop filming me. Stop filming me or I'm going to terminate you.

Mayfair Staff Member 2:

This is the knife we give you.

Mayfair Staff Member 1:

I said, stop filming me. Thank you very much.

Mayfair Staff Member 3:

And delete it because nobody gave you permission.

Mayfair Staff Member 1:

Nobody.

Mama C.A.T.:

I don't need permission.

Mayfair Staff Member 3:

You do need permission.

Mama C.A.T.:

I live here. I'm a resident here, darling.

Mayfair Staff Member 3:

You're not a resident, you're a participant.

Mama C.A.T.:

I'm a participant.

Mayfair Staff Member 3:

Yeah.

Mama C.A.T.:

Okay.

Mayfair Staff Member 3:

You're a participant and you...

Betancourt:

It took less than a minute of this conversation for the staff at the Mayfair to remind Mama C.A.T. of two things, first that they can exit her from Project Room Key if she disobeys them, second that she doesn't have the rights of a resident or a tenant. [She's a participant](#), and that's an [important distinction](#).

Molly Rysman:

When you're a tenant, you sign a lease, you sign a legal document and there are laws that protect you as a tenant and protect the landlord. Those laws don't apply when you don't sign a lease.

Betancourt:

Here's Molly Rysman, [Chief Programs Officer at LAHSA](#).

Rysman:

And it needs to be different because we want to quickly get people into interim housing. Interim housing is an emergency solution. The way it's supposed to work, and the way we want it to work, is that you move in an emergency situation and you're only there a short time. That's what we all want is for people to only be in interim housing a short time and then to get their own apartment where they can have those legal rights and protections and anonymity and privacy and all the things that come along with having your own apartment.

Betancourt:

So the idea is that in order to facilitate getting people off the street quickly, LAHSA takes them under its wing, takes responsibility for them, and doing that means taking away much of the autonomy that the rest of us expect in our living situations.

Rysman:

There do have to be some rules because you want the space to be safe. You don't want people to be exposed to violence, you don't want people to be exposed to verbal abuse. You don't want unhealthy situations. There's all sorts of things that come up. I think any of us who've lived with roommates know there's all sorts of situations that come up that can create conflict, and even beyond conflict, create a space that's unsafe for people to be in. Project Room Key had the added challenge of the COVID pandemic, so people needed to have their temperature checked when they entered the space. They weren't supposed to leave beyond a curfew because we didn't have nurses who could check for COVID symptoms if someone showed up at 2:00 AM.

Betancourt:

So the reason... is the reason for all of the rules, the curfew, the fact that they can't interact with each other in their rooms and all that sort of stuff. Is that all related to COVID? Is that all to protect from transmission?

Rysman:

Well, some of the rules, I guess that are also around safety, which we always have rules in all of our programs around safety.

Betancourt:

So the big difference... I guess what I was going to ask is the big difference with a roommate situation is like you're allowed to have a knife in your kitchen, in your apartment, and you know what I mean? There's sort of like a level of trust with a roommate situation and so how is this population different than from the way that all the rest of us deal with each other?

Rysman:

Yeah, no, there's expectations on the public sector. I mean, these are publicly funded programs, they're paid for with taxpayer dollars and so there's expectations around that they're going to be safe.

Betancourt:

Will sees it differently.

Sens:

It's important for Project Room Key to have us as participants instead of tenants because it helps them to maintain their control over the building. There's just so many rules just made to make people easier to control.

Betancourt:

And what do you think the goal of that control is? What are they trying to accomplish by controlling you?

Sens:

Well, they're just making their job easier in their mind, I'm sure.

Betancourt:

Will gave me [this example](#). He says the staff sometimes [put notices on every door](#) in the hotel.

Sens:

It just says that the hotel is closing basically and tells you to find a shelter if you need to.

Betancourt:

After getting one of these notices, Will asked a staff member what was going on.

Sens:

I was like, "Oh, what are we supposed to do about this? I don't have housing. I don't have any place to go." And he just kind of downplayed it, "Well, that's just for other people. That's not for you. You're a good example of the kind of people that we want here. This is for other people that aren't getting up to find work and are just using the hotel to get drunk and take drugs." He just tried to put it on other people with what he would call unsatisfactory behavior.

Betancourt:

What did he mean when he was talking about you being good, do you think?

Sens:

I get that a lot and it's just because I dress a certain way and I carry myself a certain way and there's certain behavior that they reward and other behavior that they punish.

Betancourt:

As we talked, Will kept using the same word to describe Project Room Key, carceral. Will is one of about 10 Project Room Key participants, many of whom had also lived at Echo Park Lake and saw the benefits of community building and organizing, who joined with other unhoused people and activists to form [UTACH, Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing](#).

Sens:

We came together to, first of all, to get the right to come in later than seven o'clock.

Betancourt:

[UTACH convinced LAHSA to change the curfew to 10:00 PM](#) and to officially reverse one of the eviction notices participants had gotten. They also demanded everything from [keys to their rooms, to better food](#). The group was also a way to connect people living in different Project Room Key sites. By comparing notes, they found that some providers were better than others. At the Mayfair where Mama C.A.T. lived, residents reported being given no toilet paper.

Sens:

UTACH's greatest asset to the community is the unifying of people, of different factions of people, like housed, unhoused, from different parts of the city under one blanket so that we can share information and figure out how to get what we need.

Betancourt:

In the meantime, Will and Sarah were still waiting for housing, real housing, and it's not easy to find. In 2021 as part of the [American Rescue Plan](#), the federal government [issued thousands of emergency housing vouchers](#), specifically for unhoused people. The city of Los Angeles got about 3,600 vouchers, but as of late October 2022, only about 15% of them had been used. Will and Sarah found out why. They had a voucher but [couldn't find a landlord who would accept it](#).

Sens:

They treat the emergency housing voucher like it's the coronavirus.

Betancourt:

Many landlords [run criminal background and credit checks](#) on prospective tenants. A practice that's devastating for [unhoused applicants who are more likely to have run-ins with law enforcement](#) and have trouble [maintaining good credit](#).

Sens:

What we have here is like a hunt and peck kind of thing that's just like... it's prolonged to the point that we might get kicked out of the hotel before we can get a place.

Betancourt:

Here's LAHSA's Molly Rysman again...

Rysman:

There's a huge lack of supply of permanent housing, both in terms of rental subsidy as provided by the federal government and in terms of the actual physical apartments we can find. And so what we find is that we're in this terrible situation where people move into interim housing and they might be stuck there for a year, and these are hard, hard places to live for a year.

Betancourt:

When we talked, Will and Sarah had been staying at the Grand for 17 months, and they weren't the only ones stuck in limbo. 183 people left Echo Park Lake to go into interim housing. As of September 2022, only 17 had found permanent housing. Echo Park Lake isn't the only place where the city has cleared unhoused people out of public space. In July of 2021, about [200 people were living on Venice Beach](#), in Mike Bonin's district. He's the city council member we heard from in part one of this story, but he says that effort had a very different outcome.

Mike Bonin:

We have 106 people who are permanently housed and another 34 still in interim with a voucher.

Betancourt:

Mike says what made the difference was the city's motivation for clearing the beach.

Bonin:

I went into it saying our measure of success is not clearing Venice Beach and clearing the space, the measure of success is housing people. If we go in and we try to house people, the public space will be reopened to the general public as a consequence of that effort, and that was not the goal going in. So we were very open and we were very deliberate and we were very methodical and relationships were built. And we actually offered people housing.

Betancourt:

But the truth is, there's not enough housing to do this for all the almost 42,000 unhoused people in Los Angeles. Mike has [advocated for policies](#) like turning vacant apartments into affordable housing, rewriting zoning laws so that developers have to build more affordable housing and more short-term subsidies like the one Queen and Wall Street used to get settled in their apartment.

Bonin:

Those solutions, when they are happening, are happening too rarely and too slowly and too expensively.

Betancourt:

That's partly because new housing developments intended for unhoused people are often [met with resistance](#) from housed neighbors. Mike says homelessness is a hard problem to solve, but it's made harder by a particularly poisonous idea.

Bonin:

People are homeless by choice, they're dangerous, they're drug addicts, they don't want housing, and all the government wants to do is funnel millions of dollars to their developer buddies to get them indoors. So it breeds this anger that the system isn't just failing, but the system is designed to fail. It has gone over the past few years from something a handful of people would throw out at a town hall meeting objecting to homeless housing, to what is really a dominant... a theme in political discourse.

Betancourt:

They're the same judgments Will hears from the staff in Project Room Key, in the way he says they talk about participants.

Sens:

And you're sitting there cursing them, calling them bad people, and trying to punish them in various ways. They're here because they come from a broken part of society, so you're going to have to expect that their behavior is not going to be on the line of exactly what you want them to exhibit.

Betancourt:

The way Will sees it, the economy has gaps in it. People fall or are pushed into those gaps. Because those people no longer look or act like the people who hold power, [the people who hold power find ways to remove them and to punish them](#). This is an old, old problem. In LA, it goes back more than a hundred years. Like many places in the West, California's economy was booming in the late 1800s, thanks to seasonal industries like agriculture and logging. In her book, [City of Inmates](#) historian [Kelly Lytle Hernandez](#) writes that those industries depended on cheap labor from poor people. In the wintertime, when that work slowed down, there was nowhere for those workers to go and no way for them to earn money. Many of them headed to the budding city of Los Angeles where settler families were scandalized by their raucousness and drinking. So the city passed laws specifically outlawing those things. It became illegal to sleep in public, to be drunk in public, even to sing or shout in public without a permit. According to California state law, anyone who appeared to be capable of getting a job and didn't have one was labeled a vagrant and jailed or fined. Police rounded up people living on sidewalks and in parks, and in tent cities, they called tramp jungles and put them in jail. Chain gangs made up of those unhoused men swung sledgehammers to break up tons of rock, then used it to pave the new streets downtown. The men hauled material to the new parks the city was building to beautify the growing neighborhoods. One of the parks they built was Echo Park, with its serene Lake overlooking the valley below. Unlike a hundred years ago, the city no longer puts unhoused people on chain gangs, but from Will's perspective, the system is still rigged to look more successful, and maybe more humane, than it is.

Sens:

The powers that be put a lot of energy, a lot of money into creating this facade. The facade is that the people in charge have everything under control. The people in charge are doing good things for the public and they're keeping things nice for people. The people in charge, which is our city and our greater

government that's providing the money, are creating pathways for people to have hope and to have a new life outside of the old life, which is on the streets, but it's not true.

Betancourt:

Mike Bonin, who saw how the city worked from the inside for nine years, told me something similar.

Bonin:

I cannot count the number of days and hours and debates the council has had about laws criminalizing homelessness or lawsuits about laws criminalizing homelessness. A fraction of that time has been spent figuring out how to deal with the systemic causes of homelessness or how to more quickly and more cost-effectively get people off the streets. And it is a phenomenon born of frustration and anger and elected officials looking for not even a real quick fix, but a perceived quick fix.

Betancourt:

A perceived quick fix. So who's the audience? Mike says officials need a quick fix because their constituents demand it.

Bonin:

If elected officials had more people pressuring them and nudging them, approaching them at the farmer's market or a church saying, "We need more housing, we need more services for people who are unhoused," that would start happening. But instead, you get the people saying, "Don't, don't, don't."

Betancourt:

Riley Montgomery was one of the housed residents in the Echo Park neighborhood who didn't want people living in the park, but also wanted the city to find housing for them. We heard from him in part one, in a phone conversation before we met in person. Sorry for the quality. I asked him what he knew about where unhoused people went after the park closed.

Riley Montgomery:

All I knew is that people were going to be transferred into the LA Grand Hotel, they were offered housing vouchers, and that housing voucher would eventually turn into permanent housing. It's not like they were kicking people out, they were transitioning them to a five-star hotel in downtown LA.

Betancourt:

In Riley's defense, the city didn't exactly hold press conferences following up, telling the public how their unhoused neighbors from Echo Park Lake were doing a year later, but Will wants people like Riley to look deeper.

Sens:

They're not seeing the carcerality in the system because they haven't experienced it, they can't sense it, they can't smell it. It's just so easy to just take it and be like, "Okay, it's being handled," and latch onto this perspective that, "Oh, they have it so easy, these homeless people. I don't know what they're complaining about." It's easier to do that than to believe a truth that you don't know if you can do anything about it.

Betancourt:

It's really hard to confront a problem that you don't know how to do anything about, especially personally, where if you feel like that's unacceptable, but I don't know how to fix it, that's a really uncomfortable feeling.

Sens:

Yes, definitely. But it's something that, if we're going to evolve as a species and we're going to stay on this planet, we're going to have to figure out how to do that and be okay with it. You have to know what hot dogs are made of. You got to find out what are they made of. You can't just keep gulping down this gross, disgusting (censored) and saying, "It's okay." Because it's not and you know it. Stop turning your blind eye... a blind eye to the issues, even if you can't do anything about it because what it does is it creates an unnatural perspective of the world around you and you act on an unnatural perspective and you're treating people based on an assumption that's not true. There's a whole sequence that put me here that you're not aware of.

Betancourt:

More people are seeing the reality of how city policies affect unhoused people In Los Angeles. In November 2016, LA voters overwhelmingly [chose to raise property taxes](#) to pay for more housing for the city's vulnerable. Some observers say the city has [squandered the \\$1.2 billion](#) the measure generated. But there's a shift happening in city leadership too. Votes were still being counted by the time we finished this episode, but as of mid-November, it looked like Mitch O'Farrell, who organized the closure of Echo Park and moved residents into temporary housing, would not win reelection in 2022. Instead, voters in his district appeared to favor an activist, a union organizer named [Hugo Soto-Martinez](#), who wants to end the city's sweeps of unhoused encampments and streamlined the creation of affordable housing. Here's Mike Bonin again.

Bonin:

Things are starting to change. We [moved the elections to even years](#) as opposed to off years, so they're on the same ballot as president or governor or US senator, and so we have a bigger electorate, a younger electorate, a more diverse electorate, and consequently a [more progressive electorate that's been pushing for different approaches](#). We've had incumbents who are being thrown out of office by people who are representing a different perspective. And so things are beginning to change because I think people are getting increasingly frustrated with the inequity of the way that system works, and also the fact that it doesn't actually solve anybody's problem. So no matter where you come from, that approach ain't working.

Betancourt:

Even if a sea change is happening in LA politics, it won't be easy to turn the ship, and it won't happen quickly. The gears that criminalize homelessness have been turning for so long. I asked Mike what people like Riley, who felt they lost their park space because of the city's lack of housing options, could have done differently. He said they should look beyond just the city government, which only has so many resources, and also lobby county and state officials to make policies that reduce homelessness. But he's seen a change happen when housed people simply lend a hand to others who were living on the streets. Even something small like bringing someone a cold bottle of water when it's hot outside, he said that can break down walls. It can help people see homelessness and their neighbors who are living through it, a little more clearly.

Miller:

In September 2022, Will and his girlfriend, Sarah, finally got an apartment. About a hundred other former residents of Echo Park Lake exited interim housing, but not to permanent or interim housing. Mark asked LAHSA what happened to them. They didn't know. As of mid-August, over 700 people were living in Project Room Key hotel rooms in Los Angeles, but the city is gradually phasing out the program. The last Project Room Key hotel, the Grand, is scheduled to close in January of 2023. If LAHSA can't find participants permanent housing by then, they will be transferred to other interim housing. Thanks to Mark Betancourt for that story. For more information, toolkits, and to download the interactive transcript for this episode, visit 70millionpod.com. 70 Million is an open-source podcast because we believe we are all part of the solution. We encourage you to use our episodes and supporting materials in your classrooms, organizations, and anywhere they can make an impact. You may rebroadcast parts of or entire episodes of our five seasons without permission. Just please drop us a line so we can keep track. 70 Million is made possible by a grant from the Safety and Justice Challenge at the MacArthur Foundation and is produced by LWC Studios. This episode was edited by Monica Lopez and Juleyka Lantigua, who is the show's creator and executive producer. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Erica Huang mixed this episode. Haylee Millikan fact-checked the story. And Michelle Baker is our photo editor. I'm Mitzi Miller. Thank you for listening.

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