



Sorry, No Change

Palo Alto grapples with panhandling, homeless problem

They'll do anything but look at me," the young panhandler on the streets of Palo Alto says as the cold November air turns his breath into steam. "The motherfuckers are scared to look me in my eyes." Letting loose a sad and twisted laugh, he watches his companion hurry to confront a well-dressed woman crossing University Avenue.

"Spare change?" queries the other man, visibly repulsing his target with the aromatic evidence of baths too few and infrequent. Smiling briefly at the woman, who presses some folding money into his hand, the man self-consciously reveals—then quickly hides—brownish, decaying teeth that suggest a more-than-passing acquaintance with members of the opiate family.

"Got us some heater money," he croons to his buddy on the bus stop bench, unfolding the bill and then recoiling at its small denomination.

The scene, and countless variations, has become commonplace along Palo Alto's main drag. On Thanksgiving Day, University Avenue was dotted with more than a dozen panhandlers working window shoppers with pitches that ranged from "need bus money" to "want to buy some soup." University Avenue from El Camino Real to Middlefield Road has become a haven for growing numbers of poor and destitute who make their money in an old-fashioned way: they beg for it.

According to US government figures, fully 14 percent of the nation's population now lives below the federally recognized poverty level. The percentage of persons living below poverty level is now higher than at any time during the previous three presidential administrations. This leads many experts to worry that efforts to cut the federal budget deficit will only worsen the situation in the months and years ahead.

"It's a problem for my business, I'll tell you that," says one of Palo Alto's small shopkeepers, who asked to remain anonymous. "I don't want any trouble and I don't want to make any trouble," he says, worried that any attention to the problem might further damage his business. "But I do wonder how long people will come here to do their shopping when they have to step over human refuse to get in my door."

Panhandling has reached epidemic proportions on much of the West Coast. In Seattle, an ordinance went into effect last week to punish aggressive panhandlers. The law—the first of its type in the nation—provides for 90 day jail sentences and \$500 fines for those who panhandle "with intent to intimidate another person into giving money." The new legislation shocked many in the Pacific Northwest, where person-to-person help has long been a part of the timber culture.

Hordes of ill-clad people with outstretched hands were, up until the recent, much-ballyhooed "economic recovery," mostly confined to blighted parts of urban areas like New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh. In the last several years, however, many downwardly mobile people have followed their more upwardly mobile neighbors to the Golden State in search of California's riches and good weather.

Add to this the recent slump in the Silicon Valley high-tech industry, a minimum wage that recipients decry as failing to provide the minimum necessities of a decent life and then factor in the high cost of local housing, and Bay Area cities like Palo Alto quickly lose much of the luster that attracted thousands of new residents in the last two decades.

"Panhandling in Palo Alto is illegal," says Palo Alto police Lt. Jim Bonander flatly, adding that his department gets about "one call per week" from residents or merchants offended by begging taking place on their doorsteps. "It doesn't matter if they are aggressive or not

aggressive. If they are asking people for money, they can be cited for a misdemeanor offense."

Despite the number of complaints, Bonander estimates that the PAPD writes only "roughly one" panhandling citation per month because officers personally must witness the offending requests.

"Our commission has been looking at the problem," says Mary Payton-Minkus, chair of the City Council-appointed Palo Alto Human Relations Commission. "There is a need for some central body to pull together the organizations that are providing resources to these people and I think that is a reasonable role for the city to play."

Payton-Minkus says the Reagan Administration's push to "privatize" charity efforts has created a dilemma for many people who were taught as children not to give money to beggars. "It's a very personal decision," she says, "but I still prefer to see help of this kind come from an organization of some sort rather than be provided directly from person-to-person as is the case with panhandling."

"Generally speaking, I don't think there are enough resources out there," Payton-Minkus says, distressed by federal program cutbacks that have not yet been replaced by local efforts.

"I am particularly worried about what will happen if the [transient] hotels in downtown Palo Alto are closed," she adds, referring to city efforts to force bargain rate hotels to meet municipal building codes or close down. "Those hotels provide just about the only available housing for many of these people, and we need to be concerned about taking actions that worsen the problems of the homeless."

For her part, Payton-Minkus says that in this holiday season, when so many have so much to be thankful for, she is not at all discouraged by the seemingly intractable problems posed by homelessness and panhandling. "Any time a problem is getting attention, it is an encouraging sign."

—Hal Plotkin.