

A few of the many faces and stories of the newly homeless in San Diego county



Bobbie Bray has been living out of her compact car in various locations in Oceanside. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)



Delanie Bollinger and Mike Tavenner sift through the clothing offered in Oceanside.
(Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)



Robert Prokosh lives out of his car at the Jewish Family Service's safe parking lot in Mission Valley. (Gary Warth U-T)



At the San Diego Rescue Mission where they live, single dad Christopher Johnson tries to wake up two of his four children (Anthony Marquis Johnson, 7, and Noah Johnson, 3) Friday morning. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)



Johana Dedapper sits Friday on her upper bunk bed at the San Diego Rescue Mission. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)



Roberta Adams, who lives at the San Diego Rescue Mission, writes in her journal on Friday. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)

BY GARY WARTH

“I never thought this would happen to me.”

It’s a refrain heard often from people who suddenly fall into homelessness, and it’s being heard more and more these days.

For some, homelessness came about for economic reasons, such as with Robert Prokosh, who began living in his car when his rent went from \$700 to \$1,400 in one month.

Or it could be because of domestic violence, such as what Roberta Adams escaped from before moving into the San Diego Rescue Mission.

Or a job loss, which happened to Bobbie Bray, a former caregiver who now lives in her car in Oceanside.

For whatever reasons, more people are becoming homeless, and service providers across the county say they are seeing a surge in people seeking help.

Why are so many people falling into homelessness for the first time? There is no one reason. Ask five different people why they became homeless, and you’re likely to hear five different answers.

AISHA HOBSON

Aisha Hobson, 41, pulls her 2017 Dodge Journey SUV into the Dreams for Change safe parking lot in Encanto around 8 p.m. most nights after finishing her work day and visiting her mother.

“When I come here, I try to decompress,” she said about her nightly routine. “My first few minute I pray.”

Hobson moved from Chicago to San Diego with her parents and siblings in 1994, and she has worked two jobs for much of her life. In 2020, she and her son and a friend were living in a three-bedroom El Cajon apartment for \$2,450 a month, which she could no longer afford after her friend moved away.

Her son moved in with her mother, and Hobson began sleeping in her car because she couldn't find another place to live.

Since then, she has earned a license as a pharmacy technician and is working at Scripps Mercy Hospital in Hillcrest some days and the county's Psychiatric Hospital on Rosecrans on others. Her schedule fluctuates from 40 hours one week to 48 hours the next.

“I make pretty decent money, but if I'm not hearing, ‘We don't have a vacancy,’ I'm hearing ‘You have to have a better credit score.’”

Hobson is impressed by the many services that are available for people in need, but she feels that she is in the back of the line for help as a single person who is stable, sober and working.

“I've met some doctors who are homeless right now,” she said. “It's hard to live in California right now.”

As someone who came from a stable family and is a working professional, Hobson is frustrated about her situation.

“The sad part is, even with the upbringing and doing things the right way, you still can fall, and sometimes you fall hard,” she said. “That's the part that becomes frustrating. When you try to do everything right, and it doesn't fall in place for you.”

ROBERT PROKOSH

Sudden rent increases are not unique to San Diego.

Robert Prokosh, 68, was renting an apartment in Las Vegas when his monthly rent jumped from \$700 to \$1,400 in July.

Unable to find another place and knowing it would not be possible to live in a car during a Las Vegas summer, he headed back to his hometown of San Diego.

“I grew up here,” he said. “I was raised here, went to school here. I owned homes in Linda Vista and Allied Gardens and San Carlos.”

Prokosh had moved away for work, and for years had a job as a tour bus driver before settling in Las Vegas.

After the rent increase, he and his wife moved into the safe parking lot operated by Jewish Family Service in Mission Valley.

He's not sure about his future plans. A few weeks ago, he had a heart attack at the parking lot, and a buddy drove him to a hospital.

"Now they're talking about open-heart surgery," he said. "They think I have a tear in my heart."

Prokosh needs surgery, but said he is unsure when it could happen because the hospital will not schedule the operation until he has a place to recuperate other than his car.

BOBBIE BRAY

"It's tough out here," said Bobbie Bray, 60, who lives in her car in Oceanside. "It's not for me. I don't belong out here. I don't fit in."

Bray had her own cleaning business and was living with a family and working as a caregiver for a member of the household. After the woman she was caring for died last year, Bray said she got an apartment in Carlsbad, but was scammed out of \$6,000.

"Everything from there just went downhill," she said. "Any money I had in the bank went to hotels because I didn't want to be homeless. I didn't know what to do. I was scared. I didn't realize that was going to be very expensive, but my money just dried up."

She began spending evenings in her car, but is only able to sleep a few hours each night out of fear.

"I'm never safe," she said. "There's always guys around my car, looking in. A few times they'd drive by and ask for sex. No way in heck. It's not me."

Bray has a grown son and said she had worked all her life and is looking for a job.

"I just need a place," she said. "I work with a dog groomer as a bather, and I want to get another full-time job. I just want to work and have a place where I can lock the door and feel safe and cook something. I don't care how big or how small."

DELANIE BOLLINGER AND MIKE TAVEUVEU

Oceanside couple Mike Taveuveu, 35, and Delanie Bollinger, 28, have been living in a car since Bollinger left her job about five months ago.

"I had a little apartment nearby, and I decided it wasn't working out and I needed a little more freedom to figure out what I actually wanted to do before I get another job in six months to a year," Bollinger said.

Taveuveu said he had been living with his sister and her family in Vista, but last year decided to move out to give them more space.

The couple said life on the street is not so bad, though Bollinger said she sometimes has second thoughts when nights are so cold she can't feel her fingers or toes and her blankets don't keep her warm.

"There's days when I'm really blessed, and days when I'm like, man, I don't know how I'm going to get through this," she said.

While they acknowledge their homelessness was more of a choice than something that was forced upon them, they're not sure how to get out of it.

Taveuveu said he will look for a job that is something he'll want to do for a long time and can get him into an apartment, but he also knows it might be hard to make rent.

Bollinger said she doesn't want to go back to a job she does not like, but knows that could be a challenge.

"There's a lot of jobs, but most of the ones that are available are minimum wage, and minimum wage isn't enough to afford a place here and afford food," she said. "It's not really feasible. It almost feels pointless."

Taveuveu said he keeps a positive outlook.

"No matter what, good or bad, we just know that we're going to make it," he said. "It's got to be better. It's going to get better. Just stay solid, keep moving forward and upward, you know?"

JOHANA DEDAPPER

Johana Dedapper, 47, has one of the more unusual stories about becoming homeless.

After an unhappy career working in a bank in her native Belgium, she opened an Airbnb after her two children moved out, and she decided to live an adventurous life of traveling and attending music festivals.

She met an American man staying in her Airbnb, and they became a couple traveling to concerts across Europe.

When his visa expired and he returned to the United States, he invited her to join him, and she arrived in the country

Oct. 6.

Their travel adventures continued, and they were joined by a male friend. Her boyfriend suggested they attend a Katy Perry concert in Las Vegas and she agreed, though the singer's music was hardly the type they had been enjoying together.

"He had a gambling problem and I didn't know it," she said. "In two and a half hours, he gambled all of his money and our money. My friend and me, we were trying to do

everything to get him away from the table.”

She lost about \$3,700, and all three were broke, and they spent the night in their car.

The couple’s travels continue, and they arrived in Ocean Beach last month.

Dedapper then experienced another side of her boyfriend she had never seen, as he began getting cash advances from his credit card and buying cocaine. She said he became verbally abusive, and one day a homeless person she had befriended intervened, and she began living on the beach with her new friends.

“I think they probably saved my life,” she said. “I knew it was getting dangerous.”

A chance conversation with someone from the San Diego Rescue Mission led to an offer to join their program. Dedapper said she realized this was an opportunity she had to take, and she enrolled in the year-long residency program in early December.

“After three days I finally stopped crying and I said, ‘Once I get back on my feet, I’m going to give back what you guys gave me,’” she said. “Not only that, but I’m going to help every one of my friends on the beach.”

ROBERTA ADAMS

San Diego native Roberta Adams, 62, has overcome addiction and homelessness in the past year, emerging from a dark place that resulted in a week-long hospital stay and three follow-up visits.

She described a past relationship as toxic, abusive and very drug-related, which lasted on-and-off for a few years.

While living in Hemet, she left the man she was with, entered a program to become sober, and for eight months lived in her own place.

“Then COVID hit, and the next thing you know, I’m getting high again and inviting him back in my life again,” she said. “It was the same drama, worse than any other time, and that continued until I made up my mind to let that (expletive) go.”

Adams has diabetes, and she said she would neglect to take insulin shots when using drugs. Her health was failing by the time a friend paid her Uber fare to drive her from Hemet to Perris, where she caught a Greyhound bus to San Diego and then took a trolley to Grossmont Hospital.

“I couldn’t even see straight,” she said. “I couldn’t even walk straight.”

Her health stabilized after a week in the hospital, but Adams had no place to go. She did not want to move in with her grown children, and she found herself suddenly homeless.

Some at the hospital suggested she go to the San Diego Rescue Mission, where she entered a year-long program that she graduated from two months ago. She’s now on a waiting list for permanent housing.

“I know that God is working in my life,” she said.

She has blocked the man from her past relationship from seeing her, and she plans to attend a Narcotics Anonymous group every day once she has her own place.

“I don’t want to relapse ever again,” she said.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

San Diego native Christopher Johnson was heartbroken earlier this year and made a choice. He had to get back to his children, even if it meant being homeless.

He and his wife and four children had moved to Fort Worth, Texas, four years ago so his mother could be near her grandchildren. But the marriage broke up, and his wife moved back to San Diego with their three youngest children.

Johnson said he fell into a depression, but began to heal as he focused on reuniting with children.

“I basically came out to San Diego knowing I had nowhere to go,” he said about returning eight months ago. “I most likely knew I was going to be sleeping at one of my favorite beaches, and I was going to have to work my way back up.”

It didn’t come to that. His ex-wife and her boyfriend let him stay in their home for a couple of weeks. She later agreed to allow him to move out with all their children, and Johnson stayed in a hotel with a county voucher for homeless people for a few months.

He was preparing to move back to Fort Worth when he got a phone call from someone at the Rescue Mission. He ignored it, but said a voice told him to listen to the message.

The woman who called had learned about Johnson’s situation. She told him the mission had started a program for single fathers, and he would be the first participant and could lead the way for more to join.

“That call just spoke to me in a way,” he said. “I felt it was something that was selfless, and the opportunity to help other single fathers was very appealing to me.

“I know as men we’re very proud, and we’re not quick to ask for help,” he continued. “We’ll go the full amount until we can’t go anymore.”

He is seven months into the program at the Rescue Mission, where he is living with his four children.

Crisis could get worse

The San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness noticed the surge in new homeless people more than a year ago and started keeping track of numbers collected by service providers throughout the county.

The organization found more than 1,000 people became homeless each month, and for every 13 people who fell into homelessness, only 10 homeless people found housing.

Greg Anglea, chief executive officer of Escondido-based Interfaith Community Services, said the data is concerning and shows the need for more homeless-prevention services.

But that need also comes at a time when COVID-related relief funds have been exhausted, potentially making the crisis worse, he said.

Rosy Vasquez, CEO and president of Community Through Hope, said the nonprofit is hurting because COVID-relief funds have ended, and the organization has cut its homeless-prevention services just when they may be needed the most.

The operators of Brother Benno's in Oceanside said their monthly expenses have gone from about \$20,000 to \$55,000, while at the other end of the county the head of Community Through Hope in Chula Vista said they have been seeing more new clients for the past six months.

Brother Benno's outreach manager Darryl Harris said his organization has had to cut homeless-prevention services at a time when they are seeing more single mothers and seniors in need, and Community Resource Center CEO John Van Cleef said the Encinitas-based nonprofit is providing food for 445 families a month, 90 more than in previous months,

Valerie Brew, child well being and family wellness department director for SBCS, said the South Bay-based service provider helped 135 people without shelter last year, and so far has helped 189 people just since July.

Bob McElroy, president and CEO of the nonprofit Alpha Project, said he feels discouraged for the first time in more than 30 years of helping San Diego's homeless population.

"We're trying to swim upstream," he said. "I'm perplexed and don't really know what to do. We handle all the folks we have now, and hope for the best. I don't see it getting better anytime soon."

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