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## Housing as a Human Right: Black Epistemologies in Deep East Oakland

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# Housing as a Human Right: Black Epistemologies in Deep East Oakland

## An Interview with Candice Elder<sup>\*</sup>, East Oakland Collective

By Brian Anthony Davis<sup>\*\*</sup>  
University of San Francisco

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<sup>\*</sup> **Candice Elder** is a difference maker, thought leader, and changemaker. A native of East Oakland, CA, she is the Founder and Executive Director of the East Oakland Collective (EOC), a member-based community organizing group invested in serving the communities of deep East Oakland with a focus on racial and economic equity. Under Candice's leadership, EOC has garnered widespread momentum and recognition as advocates and champions of underserved populations. Candice brings her wealth of experience in serving on many community-focused boards to her leadership role in EOC and the community. In recognition of her inspirational work, Candice has received numerous awards, such as being selected as one of The Root's Top 100 Most Influential African Americans in 2019 and as a Jefferson Award winner in 2018 for her efforts to feed the unhoused. In addition, Candice has been featured in *Oakland Magazine*, KQED, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Democracy Now!* for her work with EOC.

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## Introduction

*The world told me and continues to tell me I am a Black man in a world dominated by White<sup>1</sup> supremacy. A world where White people control and extend their hegemonic force on every area of human activity. A world that suppresses and nullifies my experience as a Black man as peripheral while centering White lives, White bodies, and White lies. Racism is a White grenade that fragments every level in the facet of life for BIPOC<sup>2</sup> to various degrees to withstand, underpin, reshape, and reify White supremacy. I grew up in the Overbrook Park section of West Philadelphia, a middle-class neighborhood in the hood. As a result of this geography I grew up having Black friends and attending all-Black schools. To that extent, the majority of my teachers were Black, even the principals were Black. I do not recall having a transformative curriculum around Blackness during my elementary, middle school, or high school years. I do remember during my childhood we would start the school year talking about making AYP. AYP is known as “Adequate Yearly Progress,” and was a centerpiece in the No Child Left Behind Act. Insofar as learning about Black history, Blackness was caught in the underbelly of assessments and test scores.*

*I attended The Pennsylvania State University where I majored in African American Studies. The training and racial formation in the African American Studies department at Penn State University was radical, emancipatory, and liberatory. I understood the lies of America. I understood I was not responsible for why my neighborhood looked the way it did, I was not responsible for the condition White people put Black people and other people*

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

<sup>2</sup> BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color

*of color in, and I was not responsible for the effects of colonialism and slavery. My mom grew up telling me to protect my things because guys in the neighborhood would rob me. But White people have been robbing me all my life. White people have been robbing Black people of peace, humanity, freedom, great education, life chances, as well as our relationship with the sun, the earth, water, and more.*

*Being from the East Coast of the United States, I was caught by surprise when I moved to Oakland, California in 2018. After a four-day trip driving across the country, the first thing I noticed once I got to my new apartment in the Temescal section of Oakland was 20 tents under the bridge off of 42nd and Telegraph Avenue. The next day, my second day living in Oakland, California, I walked around the neighborhood to see other people's reactions to all of the tents under the bridge. Many people walked past the tents as if it was a normal part of life in California. We live in a time and space where people's right to housing and human decency is violated on an everyday basis. What troubles me is the everyday privilege of people who have the ability to ignore people who are houseless and who justify policies to incarcerate people for creating an affordable home in a deeply entrenched capitalistic society. It is through my confusion and disappointment that I was able to find a revolutionary force in Oakland making seismic shifts in the fight for housing and food justice.*

*Candice Elder, Founder of the [East Oakland Collective](#) (EOC), was very influential in my search for understanding the housing crisis in Oakland, California. I learned that Candice was inspired not only by her upbringing, but also by the revolutionary Black Panther Party. The work of the EOC is a direct and explicit response to the City of Oakland's lack of attention to affordable housing, disparities within the houseless community, and food justice. The work of the EOC moves from being the victims of racism and priced-out housing markets, to understanding systems that create these human rights abuses and disparities at the outset. Candice's boldness, fearlessness, and community leadership has put Oakland's housing crisis in the international spotlight. What is happening in Oakland has been normalized for decades; yet the East Oakland Collective has decided to re-center what has been strategically and intentionally peripheralized. After I first met Candice when she was a guest speaker in my Human Rights*

*Education program at the University of San Francisco, she agreed to participate in an oral history interview in the summer of 2020. In this article, Candice's words are presented as first-person narrative with key quotes selected as headings of each section.*

## **I Grew Up and Lived in Deep East Oakland**

The boundaries of East Oakland and deep East Oakland are very debatable. You could ask a million different people in Oakland where East Oakland is and they all might have different definitions. Technically speaking, East Oakland is all the land east of Lake Merritt all the way to the San Leandro border. My family moved around a lot growing up so I've lived in what we call the flatlands of East Oakland, which essentially is the hood. The flatlands of East Oakland are below the 580 highway, below the Oakland hills, and below MacArthur Boulevard. I've also lived in the Oakland Hills. My parents owned each and every single home we lived in, and if they didn't like something, they put them up for sale. I've been able to kind of get the best of both worlds—living on the flat lands and living in the Hills. We had to use someone else's address in order to get into the better Oakland public schools, which were the hills schools. And just growing up in this neighborhood and having friends who live in East Oakland, it's no surprise that I find myself now in East Oakland. I purchased property in District 7; this is where I've been as a homeowner for the last 10 years.

## **My Experience With The Education System Revealed to Me That I Was Black, and I Might Be Treated Differently Based on the Color of My Skin**

I always went to diverse schools and was always on the honor roll. What didn't sit well with me was constantly being honored with a racial signature. When I was acknowledged for my academic performance, it was acknowledged as "Black excellence," as if it was rare for Black students to excel in the academic setting. I felt alienated a bit for the attention just for getting good grades. That led me to examine why aren't Black people equal

when it comes to educational success. When my parents took me out of public schools and I went to a private predominantly-White school, I had never felt so out of place in my life.

There were only four Black people in my entire grade. I went to high school with just four Black people for four years. I would have lost myself if I did not come home to a Black family. At the time, I was going to a Black church in the hood, the same church we went to for 20-25 years. My parents put us in programs for Black youth; we did golf lessons, music lessons. As my Dad read the paper, any free thing for minority kids, he would put us in it whether we wanted to or not.

### **I Think I Would Have Lost My Blackness**

If it was not for my early public-school education, if it was not for growing up in my early years in the flatlands of East Oakland, I don't know what I would have turned out to be today. I think I would have lost my Blackness.

Fortunately, I didn't experience direct racism, but there was still a lot of classism. I went from having my parents move from the flatlands to the hills, and that kind of elevated our status a little... amongst our family and friends. In the community, it was always said, "The hills are for rich people." I feel like my parents got good deals; they worked really hard to get and deserve everything that they bought. They took care of our family, but my parents were very smart. They bought fixer uppers. I think they were able to get really good deals and purchase homes at times when it was a really good price. Now we actually can't. If we would have known what we have known back then, I'm pretty sure my parents would have kept a home or two. Now we're priced out to be able to purchase, at least in this current real estate market.

I grew up in the flatlands of East Oakland in the 1980s and early 90s. East Oakland was on a decline; we had been hit really hard by the crack epidemic. We started to see the lack of resources. We started to see the disinvestment from the community, but I was young at the time, so to me East Oakland was still thriving. Even though it was on the decline, it was still thriving. We still had businesses to go to, we had places to eat, we had

entertainment; we could eat, learn, and play in East Oakland. It was only years later that we really saw businesses leave and close. We saw our elected officials really weren't doing anything for the community.

My parents are the biggest influences for me because as a young child they started the food pantry at our church. I remember being five years old and having to get up at 5 a.m. every Saturday to go to the church and open up the food pantry. Sometimes we slept in the car while they passed out food to those who were less fortunate and sometimes we helped. To this very day, we no longer are official members of the church, but my parents still support that same food pantry. My parents have always been community-oriented; they've always given back; they always had small businesses in the community. Not only did they have a bakery, but they had a daycare in the hood. I had a great childhood and my parents were the biggest influences.

The older I got, the more I learned about Oakland history, the Black Panthers<sup>3</sup>, and learning about their role in Oakland. The Black Panthers having a school in East Oakland really inspired me. The Black Panther Party having that free breakfast program<sup>4</sup> and spreading that across the nation, forcing the government to enact a federal program to feed children before school and in the schools.<sup>5</sup> Learning about that rich history always compelled me to give back. Also working with the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and being a part of their young leadership, running their board for two years, awakened my leadership skills.

More importantly, I would say a big influence was the old guard, some of our older leaders in Oakland who have paved the way—whether good or bad. I pull from what good examples we have from Oakland leaders

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the Black Panther Party's education program, please see: <https://www.aaihs.org/resurrecting-the-radical-pedagogy-of-the-black-panther-party/>

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program read here <https://www.aaihs.org/the-black-panther-party/>

<sup>5</sup> For more on how the BPP's Breakfast Program influenced food policy, see here: <https://www.eater.com/2016/2/16/11002842/free-breakfast-schools-black-panthers>

and learn from some of the bad from our Oakland leaders and elected officials. Let's not reinvent a wheel that's broken, but rather let's form a new wheel and stop working in silos. I grew up knowing about Chuck Johnson (a community journalist), knowing about Chauncey Bailey, a famed Oakland Tribune journalist who was tragically murdered. It's to be believed he was working on a story that would have exposed the corruption in Oakland and in the community. Knowing Elaine Brown (former Black Panther Party Chairwoman) is still in Oakland, and Miss [Angela] Davis (political activist and theorist) still has a presence in Oakland.

I feel like my parents kind of formed my years under 18. I think going to the University of California, Berkeley, helped form my critical thinking skills. I took African American Studies classes with the best professors in California, and I minored in African-American Studies. Having that textual knowledge about the impact of slavery to say “slavery has formed this or has caused this”—being able to actually apply what I was experiencing and what I learned through working with the Museum of the African Diaspora—I was also being pushed by the old guard to form my own organization.

Sami Shilf's Poster  
for the  
East  
Oakland  
Collective  
(2020)





## **The East Oakland Collective Works on Racial and Economic Equity**

For us, racial and economic equity means civic engagement and leadership; that means the community actually has a voice in any process and any decision that's going to try to decide how they live and how they can thrive in the community. We do a lot of neighborhood and transportation planning work. We disrupt the planning process because usually the way that traditional planning processes work is that decisions affecting entire communities are re-imagined, reformed, and rewritten without any community say. It isn't until the plan is already decided and about to be implemented that, at the very last minute, planners decide to say they're going to present this to the community. But, at that moment, they're already dead set on the plans they're about to implement, and there really isn't any room for any revisions.

In the past few years we've been able to disrupt that process. We said, "You're not going to set foot in deep East Oakland without talking to the community, without talking to community-based organizations who've been here longer than us and we all have a right to have a voice in this process. You should be influenced by what the community wants, not the other way around." We do a lot of community engagement and outreach, a lot of strategic communications and planning, and neighborhood transportation planning. We do a lot of advising and consulting with elected officials and coalition work.

At the East Oakland Collective (EOC), we have an economic empowerment program because we believe that economic self-sufficiency is a way for our communities to thrive, our way for independence from the oppressors, a way to help fight against White supremacy, and for communities to be economically stable. Particularly we believe the way to stabilize our community economically is collective economics—for groups of us to get together and do joint ventures, which is why we have the East Oakland social lending circle program. We are collectively pulling money together and saving and working on our credit as well as jump-starting small businesses and saving to improve quality of life. We're essentially making no-interest small loans to one another. I'm in it along with 30 other

people, and we absolutely love it and we hope to continue that program. At the inception of the EOC, we started off doing advocacy, organizing and policy work with our unhoused brothers and sisters. We were feeding the unhoused as a community service project for our members as we began to expand.

### **Food is Really Simple, But There is Something Very Humanizing About Feeding Someone, About Offering Someone Food**

Breaking bread is an African and Black tradition, so not only do we break bread amongst each other quite a bit, but we also feel like we want to break bread with folks who are suffering from food insecurity and give them fresh food options. Feeding the unhoused as a community service project propelled us into an advocacy organization. We were starting to hear stories from people who live on the street that no one cares about them; no one's coming to see them. We were the only group they saw in a while. So I said, "You know, that's ridiculous, so we're going to do this more often." The next thing you know, 500 people want to do it with us; the next thing you know we're serving 3000 lunches and distributing 1000 hygiene kits. We're doing it every six weeks, so it actually formed into a program. We started doing advocacy just naturally; as you meet people, as you start to care about people, as you hear their stories and their struggles, we realize the importance of being able to speak up for people, especially if we have the resources and the connections to do so.

Seeing that over 70% of the unhoused population in Oakland is Black, there are not a lot of Black advocates at the table. There are not a lot of Black workers in this field who are making the decisions on a daily basis on what happens to our unhoused brothers and sisters, what measures or policies need to be put in place. That keeps me in this work, because sometimes I am sick and tired, and it's stressful internalizing other people's trauma.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The data reflecting the homeless population in Oakland regarding racial disparities can be found here <https://www.oaklandhomelessresponse.com/the-problem#:~:text=Data%2oalso%2oshows%2oa%2odisproportionate ,to%2ohelp%2opeople%2oin%2oneed.>

## **I Stay in This Work Because I'm Black, Because I'm a Black Woman, and There Needs to be a Representation of Black Folks Who Are Living Curbside**

The way society works, the way capitalism works, the way the country was formed, it was formed to always have someone in poverty. That's the only way White supremacy thrives is if there's someone caught at the bottom. America was built on stolen land; it was built on taking from other groups of people. That's essentially what's going on with the housing crisis. Black folks have always been marginalized when it comes to housing and economics. In Oakland, when our folks who left the armed forces after World War II and migrated to Oakland, they were in West Oakland. We were either forced there or also just by association because you wanted to be where other Black people are. There is redlining<sup>7</sup> where Blacks couldn't buy homes in certain areas. So, we didn't really have access to the hills. We were forced to live in West Oakland and in the flatlands, but then there was White flight where White folks either moved to the hills or even left Oakland and went to the suburbs. This opened up Oakland for Black folks and other minorities to purchase homes or to rent. We started seeing the explosion of homelessness really around 2016-2017 in Oakland. It stems from decades of racist housing policies and housing discrimination. We're seeing the impact of redlining and gentrification, which have led to the displacement of Black folks in Oakland. Oakland was almost a chocolate city when I was growing up; it was about 40% and now we're under 23% Black.<sup>8</sup> Most of the Black folks that are still here are highly concentrated in deep East Oakland. So we are seeing the impacts of predatory lending, which caused a lot of Black folks to lose their homes during the last economic crash. We can no longer afford to live here; the rental and the

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<sup>7</sup> A map that outlines the historical redlining structure of Oakland can be found here <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=11/37.789/-122.404&city=oakland-ca>

<sup>8</sup> This data is represented in the most recent US Census Data report. To read more about the demographics of Oakland, California, visit <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/oaklandcitycalifornia/RHI225219#RHI225219>

housing rates are going up, the cost of living is going up, but we are living on minimum wages. We don't have access to jobs and workforce development like we should in order to help create that new pool of hires that can compete with these outside applicants. We have other people moving into our jobs. We don't have that workforce development that it takes to compete for a lot of these tech jobs. We can typically go for the more blue-collar jobs within the tech industry like the cooks and janitorial staff. We're not educating our youth into workforce development enough to bring up a new wave of folks who can go into tech or other industries. We are kind of ignoring trade and other construction-like jobs where there is a lot of potential for our people to actually make really good money. With number 45 in office, we also saw a lot of federal cuts to subsidized housing.

### **There Are Folks Who Are Unhoused on the Streets With Section 8 Housing Vouchers<sup>9</sup>**

There is not enough housing stock in Oakland. People are more concerned about getting that market-rate rent than they are about providing subsidized housing. So why should they rent for only \$900 or \$1,200 when they can get double or triple that now? We're living in this very selfish and self-serving capitalistic society. The more money that's out there, the more people are coming in thinking about themselves and not thinking about what's happening if they don't accept Section 8 anymore or housing vouchers anymore. We need to incentivize property owners and landlords in particular to encourage them to actually accept more subsidized housing so that we can get more people housed. We have a mayor and an administration who care more about who can build the fastest, who can build the highest. So, land is being prioritized for market-rate private commercial development, which is squeezing out the options for affordable housing developers to even come in. We need more affordable housing developers.

We only have a small pool of affordable housing developers because

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<sup>9</sup> The Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8, is the largest federal affordable housing program funded through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

there's not that much money in an affordable house, and we need to incentivize, subsidize and make it more attractive for affordable housing developers to actually build in Oakland. And, of course, there are issues combined with planning codes that add to the crisis. We actually have a lot of land still left in deep East Oakland in particular. We can temporarily house people two to five years in tiny home villages. We need to put the tiny homes on vacant land while we still have vacant land left.<sup>10</sup>

We're trying to get ahead of the curve of speculation because East Oakland is hot right now because there's still a lot of property left and also a lot of opportunity zones, so there are some federal incentives and tax credits to building in Oakland. But we don't want outsiders; we don't want market-rate developers. We don't want speculator companies coming in and grabbing up all of our land, and then the community has no say nor does the community have opportunity to be housed themselves. EOC, and a lot of our advocate partners we work for, we believe in shifting what housing looks like.

### **Housing Is A Human Right**

That's not something that everyone really believes in because they don't act like it. It's evident in some of the policies and practices that the government has put into place. We also believe housing is not as cookie cutter as we think; it is not as textbook as we think it is. Not everyone wants to go into shared housing, not everyone wants to go into transitional housing, not everyone is going to want to go into an apartment or even ready to go to the apartment or a shared room tomorrow. But hands down, people overall say they want land, they want independence, and they want space. So let's form intentional communities that are well-designed by the people and on vacant land, and tiny homes is the way to go. We have people actually already building their own tiny homes, unpermitted on the sidewalk, in a park, taking over empty lots. Not only do we need to open up empty buildings and remodel them so we can house people, we also need

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<sup>10</sup> For more coverage of the Tiny Home Village efforts, please see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqMEEzMCmbk&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqMEEzMCmbk&feature=emb_logo)

to consider empty lands and the potential that we have to build on most of those empty lands. People already have the skills to do, so let's give them the model. Let's make these tiny homes up to code. Let's put in fresh clean water, restrooms, hook ups to the sewer, so it's better for the entire community. It will better stabilize the people who are unhoused or housing insecure. It is also a better look and more of a community feel for even the housed neighbors.

Housing is a human right because no matter what condition you are in—I don't care about drugs, mental health, or your economic status—you deserve to have a roof over your head. It is one of the basic needs as a human, and everyone has a right to that dignity. People right now are living undignified. They don't have access to use the restrooms and don't have access to fresh water. They have no ability to cook and provide food for themselves and their families; these are just basic human rights. But we're seeing the same cuts in state benefits, cuts in food stamps, cuts in housing subsidies. The government is basically saying, "We don't care about you, and we're no longer going to support you." But it is the government's job to make sure that every single citizen has the basic resources that they need to thrive.

At the EOC, we offer them the wraparound services to get them independent and to eventually transition them off of these benefits to be able to provide for themselves and their families. We're seeing a new wave of homelessness; we're not dealing with the 1980s chronic homelessness under Reagan where the Reagan Administration actually cut a lot of mental health benefits and closed the hospitals/institutions forcing everybody onto the street. Particularly in areas like San Francisco, we are still seeing the effects of chronic homelessness, where the person has been homeless for 20 plus years and is in deep mental crisis on the street, and you have to walk over them and walk around them.

**We Are Actually Seeing A New Wave of Homelessness Where the Average Person Now is One Paycheck Away From Being Housing Insecure or Unhoused Themselves**

We do a lot of education around this issue because if people knew

who was really unhoused and how some of them have jobs and go to work just like you and I, how some of them have paychecks, how some of them have benefits, but it's just they can't afford rent of \$900 a month. People are walking out of tents looking just like you and I—hair done, nails done, and everything. But their wages are not living wages, so people are not making enough money to survive with the current rate of rent and housing prices. Folks may have suffered a lot of trauma in their lives that may have really put them in the environment to spiral into homelessness, and then folks have dealt with just a lot of slumlords and evictions. There are a lot of issues around renter protection and how do we protect people from being in situations like this. If you have an eviction on your record, it is next to impossible for you to get another place, or if you have bad credit, it is next to impossible for you to rent again. If you don't have a stable working history, some people have gig jobs or people collect cans. They're not absent from income, but either they don't have enough income, or they don't have the proper documentation to prove in this very strict system that they can actually afford to pay for a place.

### **The United Nations Report Named Oakland and the Bay Area as Human Rights Violators For the Conditions That People Are Living in Right Now**

The East Oakland Collective, [The Village](#), [Love and Justice in the Streets](#), and a few other organizations led the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, on a tour of encampments in Oakland. Then there were other groups who led her on a tour in San Francisco and Berkeley. She spent a day with us, and we went to encampments in West Oakland and East Oakland, and she was able to talk to some of our unhoused leaders. She was able to see the inner workings of an encampment for a day. That gave her the background research to write her report to the UN on what she calls “informal settlements in the Western Hemisphere.” It’s a beautiful and damning report at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The full UN Report can be accessed here: <http://www.undocs.org/A/73/310/rev.1>

Leilani Farha said that for America to be a first world country with the amount of money that we have, no one should be living the way that they are. She said it's worse than “Third World” countries in cities like Oakland facing homelessness, and we have shantytowns. What was really powerful about the report was she wrote that the government should be providing resources and basic human needs—which are sanitation, access to restrooms, access to fresh drinking water, trash pickup, and rodent control. The government should be providing this in the absence of adequate housing.

Permanent and adequate housing is everyone's first priority. But in the absence of that, if the government cannot provide, then they need to stabilize people where they're at, how they are, and provide them more basic human rights. They should not be removing people or what we call “encampment sweeps,” which are really encampment closures. The government should not be doing that. There's nowhere for people to go, so when you remove a group of people from one spot, you're just pushing them to another spot. You're pushing them in front of the next school, in front of the next yard, under the next bridge, in the next neighborhood, in front of the next business, it's not solving anything. It's not helping people find housing; you're just pushing and further spreading their displacement and traumatizing people.

### **The City of Oakland Flat Out Told Us to Our Faces That They Felt Like the Report Was Just Fluff**

I felt like initially Oakland ignored it, but what I've seen since the report came out is definitely a more global awareness of what's happening in California regarding the homelessness crisis, and education is half the battle. The more people are aware of what's going on, the more people can hold the government accountable; the more people can put funding into it, the more people on a basic level care and can provide a lunch and provide a hygiene kit. The more people will get together and organize and advocate on behalf of humane practices and policies. We have seen some



changes with the city; we saw the emergence of the Tuff Shed program.<sup>12</sup> We don't believe in putting people in backyard sheds even though there are definitely remodeled versions of backyard sheds, it's still a backyard shed, and I think that just subconsciously signifies to the people, “this is what we think of you.” We're not going to put you into a tiny home which actually looks like and feels like a home, but we're going to put you into a backyard shed that makes you very temporary, signifying that you can't be here forever, but we're going to sweep you under the rug like we did something temporarily. It works for some people, but it doesn't work for others.

But if people are living there only for six to nine months and going back out onto the street, I don't see it as a solution at all. I think it's a band-aid solution, so you can get rid of that particular encampment that maybe the housed neighbors complained about at such a high amount. The city takes one step forward and sometimes two steps back, and it's a daily battle. Right now, the City of Oakland is looking at an encampment management policy—how we can have some rules and guidelines across the city about where people can live, where people can't live, what does living look like, how much space can people take up on a public sidewalk or on a vacant property. We want to see some rules and guidelines and uniformity out there as long as it's humane and as long as it comes from the people who are living the experience, as well. I'm a conscious housed person, and I'm a conscious homeowner that takes everyone into consideration whether they own property or not. Whether they are unhoused or not. The city is trying, and they have been trying since the report, but, like, how hard? I don't think hard enough or fast enough.

### **Our Unhoused Population in Oakland is One of the Most Heavily Policed Communities**

There's no coincidence that in Oakland our unhoused population is predominantly Black. There's no coincidence to that at all; I think it speaks

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<sup>12</sup> To learn more about the City of Oakland's Tuff Shed program read here <https://www.oaklandhomelessresponse.com/our-response-1>

to the same level of racism that we have been experiencing for centuries. There are a lot of encampments where there's a heavy police presence; police come with guns, they come in and out, they're always picking people up. Particularly, the encampment that used to be on East Alameda Avenue next to Home Depot in Oakland was one of the most policed encampments in Oakland. Home Depot hired full-time officers to be in that parking lot next to the encampment. They set up cameras pointed at the encampment. The police are known to sit outside the encampment and just pull people over as they're leaving the encampment, catching them on a moving violation. But then they find this person has a warrant or something like that and gets caught.

What gives the police the right to just always go in and out of these encampments—to walk through these encampments and just terrorize people? The police have to show up with public works; police are spending money to show up with public works to pick up trash because public works thinks it's a safety issue for them. Unnecessary police dollars are being spent on having police accompany public works, creating a high presence of police at encampment enclosures. The police are towing cars that people live in. They're towing people's storage vehicles; some people fix cars and resell them so they're robbing people of potential income. A lot of money is spent for the police to honestly terrorize encampments, not necessarily help with the management or help with community, but more so to terrorize unhoused folks.

### **Our Work at EOC Has Been Deeply Impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic Because We've Seen More Food Insecurity Across Our Communities**

We've expanded our services to not only just feed unhoused folks, but also to provide fresh meals, groceries, hygiene kits, sanitation kits, and household supplies to the seniors and low-income families. We went from serving 400 meals a week just to the unhoused and then doing our "Feed the Hood" program every six weeks for the unhoused, to now working Monday through Friday to make sure unhoused folks, particularly in East Oakland, are fed even across Oakland. Also to make sure our low-income and struggling families are fed and able to thrive as well during the

pandemic. We've had to source PPE [personal protective equipment] from many different places and make sure that our unhoused folks and our seniors are equipped every day. There have been some outbreaks and hotspot encampments in Oakland, but how can you properly wash your hands? How can you properly protect yourself against the virus, if you don't have access to a restroom, if you don't have access to a sink? This led the EOC to partner with The Village and Love and Justice in the Streets to do a hotel program. We've been able to temporarily house 45 individuals and families for over 70 weeks in two hotels.

### **We Are Very Much Inspired by the Black Panther Party 10-Point Model Which Addressed Housing, Food, and Education in the Mindset That We Have to Do For Ourselves**

We don't wait on anyone else; we particularly don't wait on the government, because if we do so, we are going to die first. The community takes care of its own, and then we can partner with the government if it's in the best interests of the community and is feasible; but we don't wait on that. I'm in a lot of conversations about what's going to happen after Covid-19 ends, but there's no ending in sight at the moment. People are struggling not only with food but also economically; as more time goes on, a lot of industries aren't coming back at the moment. We know folks who are in daycare, nannies, salons, personalized care businesses that are struggling, entrepreneurs that are struggling. How do we meet the needs of those small businesses, of those families, where either one or both bread winners' hours were cut or lost their jobs? These people are having to return to the gig economy, having to drive for Lyft, Uber, Doordash, do stuff to supplement or even make new income.

So how do we stabilize folks, and what happens if your unemployment is cut? The Trump administration does not believe in any benefits and subsidies for people. We are in fear of the rate of homelessness rising because of Covid-19, in fear of people losing their apartments, losing their housing, and being housing insecure. We need more economic stimuluses; we need more and different job opportunities. The EOC has been fortunate enough to be able to employ a few impacted people from those highly impacted demographics: formerly incarcerated, unhoused,

low-income, and Black folks. It's really up to us.

How do we redirect funding, how do we redirect this new normal that we find ourselves in because of Covid-19? How do we redirect that to be able to offer resources in the community? The EOC is glad to be in that space to see what the light is at the end of the tunnel after Covid-19; to be working with partners like the [Black Cultural Zone](#), [Brotherhood of Elders Network](#), the African-American Covid-19 response frontline healers, who are boots on the ground addressing economics, housing, community development now and also well into the future. These are age-old problems that our community has already been struggling with. Covid-19 just exacerbated it and put it on a global platform.

### **Closing Reflections by Brian Anthony Davis**

*I leave this conversation feeling a mixture of emotions. It always has been—and continues to be—people on the grassroots level responding to issues of denial and delayed human rights as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What is currently taking place in Oakland, California, displays the ways in which racial capitalism and the right to housing act as coterminous phenomena that exacerbate the everyday lives of people who are homeless, and in this case mostly Black and Brown people. It comes as no great surprise that the world continues to reinforce that the right to housing is not a pressing concern. Here in Oakland, the city has given and continues to give permits to businesses to build outdoor sheds for outdoor dining and other luxuries. What does it mean in the name of human rights, the name of housing for the City of Oakland specifically, and cities around the world at large, to expedite the process for businesses to create tough sheds for outdoor dining, while prolonging the process for securing adequate and affordable housing for people who are homeless? The neoliberal propensity of our society suggests that people who are homeless are in this position because of their individual choices and meritocracy, rather than acknowledging people who are homeless as subjects of and victims to state violence, along with institutional racism. These people are dehumanized in the eyes of society. I am thankful to Candice and the EOC for responding to the challenges of our particular time in the name of love, in the name of justice, and in the name of human rights, while still holding our government accountable.*