

CAN THIS MAN SOLVE SAN FRANCISCO'S HOMELESS PROBLEM?

Sam Dodge, the city's new homeless czar, aims to try.

By Jeremy Lybarger

Sam Dodge is a man always on the move. When we meet in his offices on the ground floor of City Hall — a warren of low-ceilinged, bullpen-like rooms — he's in between summits with the Department of Technology and the city's Shelter Monitoring Committee. A man toting plastic shopping bags waits in the office's cramped reception area, anxious to carry out some unscheduled business. After talking with the visitor for 10 minutes, Dodge sits down for our interview, then promptly excuses himself to use the restroom. You get the impression he's a man who has to remind himself to piss.

Such has been the treadmill of Dodge's life since October, when Mayor Ed Lee appointed him Director of the Mayor's Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships & Engagement (HOPE), following the retirement of Dodge's predecessor Bevan Dufty. Dubbed the city's "homeless czar," Dodge has what the *San Francisco Chronicle* called "the hardest [job] in City Hall": ending homelessness for the more than 6,000 people who live on the city's streets and in its shelters.

Dodge, whose boyish face belies his 40 years and gives the impression of a choirboy who ransacked a bureaucrat's closet, has the policy chops to make that goal seem less ludicrous. He grew up in Seattle and studied political economy at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., where he organized student workers.

After moving to San Francisco in 1998, he moved into professional labor organizing, first with the Service Employees International Union and later with the California Nurses Association. In June 2000, he landed at the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, where, according to his own estimates, he prevented more than 3,000 unlawful evictions, saved more than 1,000 low-cost rental units from illegal conversion, and advocated on behalf of residential hotel tenants.

His activist streak segued into a deep concern for the city's homeless and marginally housed. He helped found the Central City SRO Collaborative, which

lobbies the landlords of residential hotels to keep their buildings safe and clean. After a hiatus to earn his master's in public policy and administration from Columbia University — as well as a stint as a staff analyst at the New York City Department of Homeless Services — Dodge returned to the Bay Area in 2014. He and his wife Heather, a librarian at Berkeley City College, wanted to be closer to her father, and perhaps give their son, Myles, a more comfortable childhood than was possible in New York. (The couple also has a six-month-old daughter named Willa.)

Following a brief run as an analyst at the San Francisco Department of Public Works, Dodge was tapped to be deputy director for policy at HOPE.

"I wanted this job," Dodge says. "I felt like I could make a big difference. The opportunity of seeing things differently from working outside of here and seeing the pluses and minuses of different systems, I saw ways that we could make tremendous progress. I feel there's big opportunity costs; if you're not doing things optimally, that's real people's lives."

He knew from the beginning that his boss, Bevan Dufty, had his eye on the door. Dodge repeatedly persuaded the older man to stay on, and negotiated a "gentleman's agreement" whereby Dufty wouldn't retire before the end of 2015. When the 60-year-old Dufty finally stepped down in October, he left behind a small agency divided between showpiece innovations, such as the Navigation Center in the Mission, and political blowback stemming from Lee's statement that the city's homeless would "have to leave" when Super Bowl 50's fan village rolls into town January 30.

Dodge says the mayor was deliberately misunderstood.

"There is no plan to criminalize the homeless while the Super Bowl is going on," he says. "[*Chronicle* columnist] Phil Matier is a good guy, but he really knows how to sell a paper. He got a lot of mileage out of a side comment that had nothing to do with [criminalizing the homeless]. The actual comments were



Mike Hendrickson

about a pretty small proscribed area that's going to be fenced off."

In fact, Dodge calls himself "lucky" to work with a mayor who is "so forward-thinking." In December, Lee floated the idea of creating a new city department — informally (but maybe officially) called the Department to End Homelessness — which would bundle the city's various health, housing, drug rehab, and counseling services under one umbrella. The mayor said he'd conduct a national search for someone to head the department, but he may have to look no farther than Dodge's office in Room 18 at City Hall.

"I would do it," Dodge says without hesitation, noting that the city's housing and social service programs work individually but not in concert. "We have such a scattershot system that's been built with beautiful intentions and great ideas but isn't coordinated the way it should be and doesn't make the logical sense that it could."

Dodge rejects one-size-fits-all solutions to managing homelessness. And while it's tempting to argue that more affordable housing is the answer, Dodge knows that's just a start. Because "the urban poverty agenda isn't on the Con-

Sam Dodge outside of City Hall.

gressional radar," he says, cities have to cobble together their own funding and triage their own transitional, short-term, and long-term programs. Housing stock is crucial, but so are residential hotels, shelters, and mental health and substance abuse programs.

The Navigation Center at 1950 Mission Street — formerly school district property that laid fallow for years — has been one of the administration's most novel approaches to sheltering the homeless. Tenants can bring entire encampments into the facility, including spouses, domestic partners, pets, and personal belongings (most of which violates the rules at other shelters). Dodge says that 260 people have been through the Center so far, with 75 percent eventually transitioning into permanent housing.

Despite the encouraging stats, Dodge knows there's still "tremendous work to be done. At the current scale, we could work for another 10 years in that location it feels like some days," he says.

The Mission's pilot location is slated to continue through June, at which point Dodge hopes to cut the

ribbon on a new Navigation Center in another neighborhood. While he remains tight-lipped about which neighborhoods are on the table, he's enthusiastic about the next Center potentially catering to homeless youth or people with mental health disabilities. As to where the city will find another hospitable 36,000-square-foot vacant space, Dodge says that "everyone can think of some place, some parking lot or something, that can maybe be used differently."

In the meantime, the logistics of a bigger, more implacable problem nag him. With El Niño expected to ravage San Francisco with rain, wind, and plummeting temperatures this winter, the city is amping up shelter capacities to manage what Dodge deems an impending "moment of crisis." He wants to make sure that the 1,000 to 1,300 extra shelter spaces made temporarily available during the rainy season are accessible to those who need them, and that the city's outreach teams remain connected to clients who may be displaced because of extreme weather or stricter security during the build-up to the Super Bowl.

In other words, it's just another obstacle in the around-the-clock job of being San Francisco's homeless czar — a role Dodge describes as "a pressure cooker."

Still, "it's much harder to be a front desk clerk at a residential hotel or at a drop-in center," Dodge says. He claims to welcome the barrage of criticism, anger, and frustration from both the homeless and housed that are his daily occupational hazards.

"I want to make sure we're using the city's resources and taxpayer resources as well as we can," he says, looking past his office's barred windows at a dingy December sky massing with stormclouds. "We don't have money to waste, our need is so overwhelming. But is it too much? Or too little? I mean, you tell me. Look out on the street. Are we doing too much for the homeless?"

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