

Helping the Last, the Least, and the Lost: Compassionate Planning for Baltimore's Unsheltered Homelessness

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Introduction to Unsheltered Homelessness

Unsheltered homeless people sleep at least one night in a place not meant for human habitation. (street, motor vehicle, abandoned house, outside, etc.)

Factors that push people into homelessness:

- Loss of Employment
- Health Issues
- Substance Abuse
- Lack of family support
- Rising cost of housing



Panhandling on MLK at Saratoga

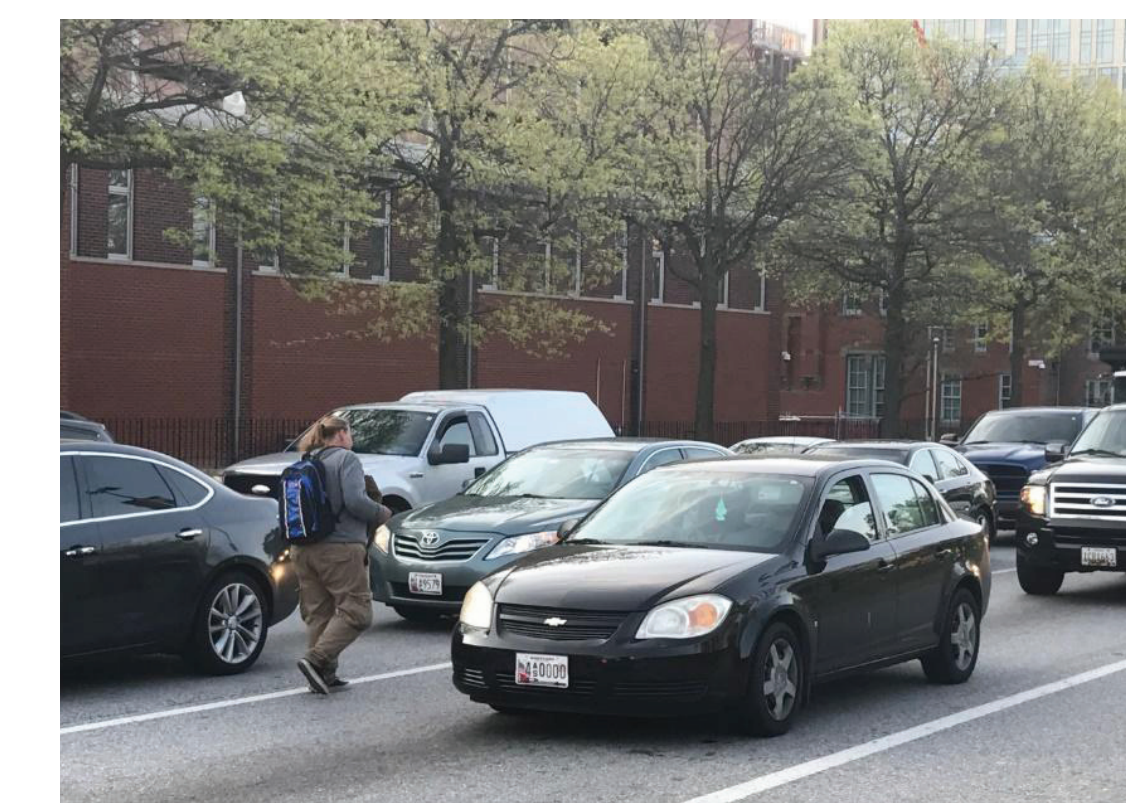
Sun heavy on crumbling sidewalk, smog rising from idling cars. With sweat running around the edge of her sunburnt face, she walks the lane with a weathered cardboard sign and Styrofoam cup in hand.



She shuffles through a labyrinth of cars and exhaust, exhausted. Horns blowing at her – an obstacle, less than human. Hope reviving with a sudden window cracking and a gift of tarnished coins.

The cycle repeating, again and again – Red light – lanes, Green light, median. Daily earnings unpredictable – a few dollars crinkled one day, only a few coins the next.

She dreams of a day when she doesn't have to begin every conversation with "Hi, could you spare some change?" then end with "Thank you and God Bless." One day, she'll have friends, and can give to them in return.



Solution:
Create compassionate policies, procedures and relationships.

Is this a problem of public space, where people experiencing homelessness are a nuisance...

...or a problem with the condition of the people, rather than the use and control of public space?



Methods

Conducted ethnography of 10 residents of the "MLK Encampment" - a homeless encampment on the western edge of Baltimore's downtown from March 2016 to its city-forced closure on March 3, 2017. I documented their experiences and perspectives in the hopes of informing urban planning policies concerning homelessness and the governance of public space.

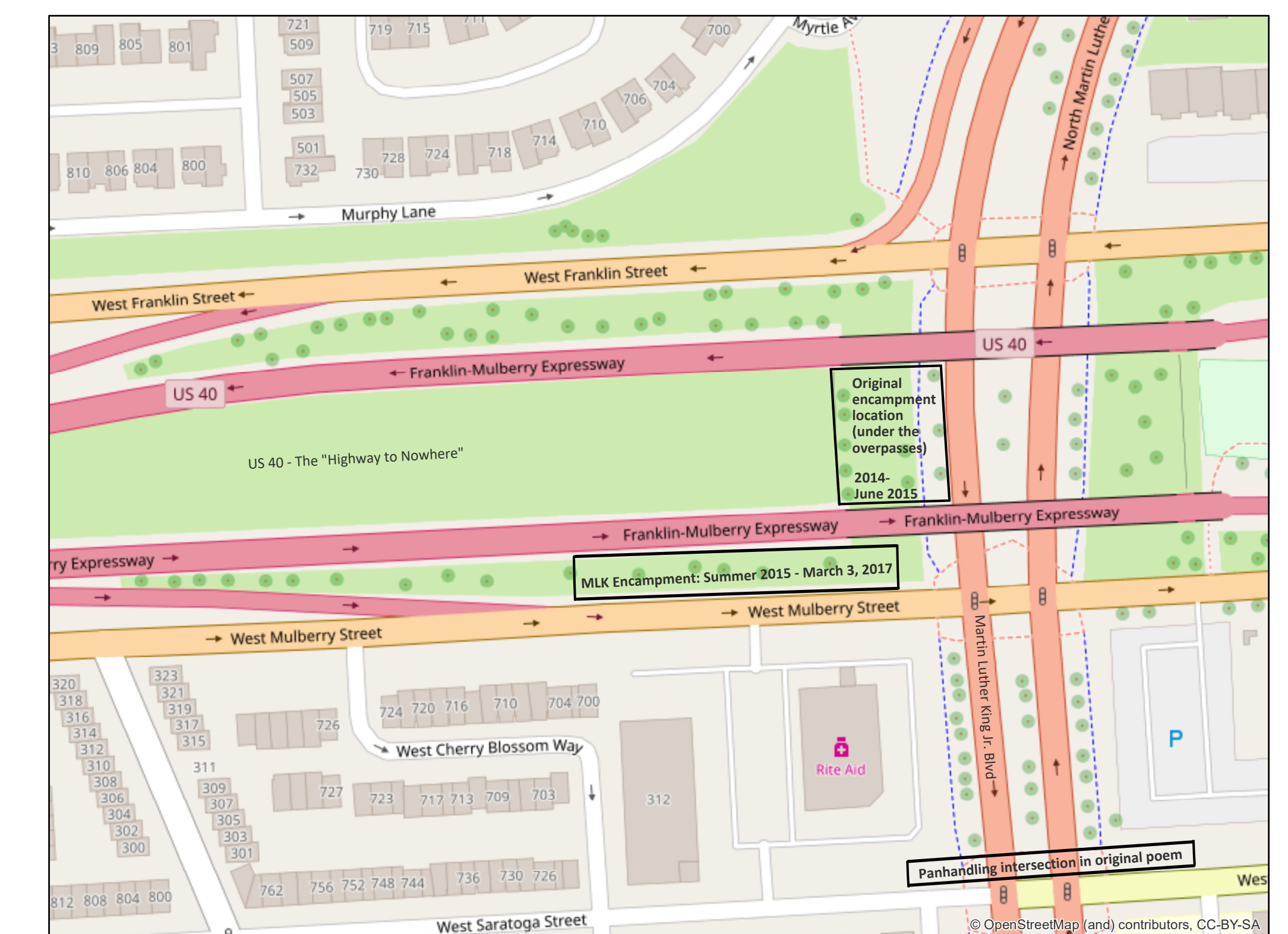
Interview topics:

- The residents themselves
- Shelter
- Interactions with the public
- Health and Wellness
- Everyday pleasures
- The end of the encampment and brighter futures



Results

- Residents would rather live outside with family than in a shelter where they are separated by gender or in transitional housing where they are separated by issue (such as substance abuse.)
- Encampments are organic, unplanned communities in the simplest form and cannot be forgotten in community development.
- People experiencing homelessness have emotional and social needs in addition to physical needs.
- Informally reaching out and giving our time to residents may be one of the most complicated yet most beneficial ways to positively impact local community development.



Recommendations for Planners

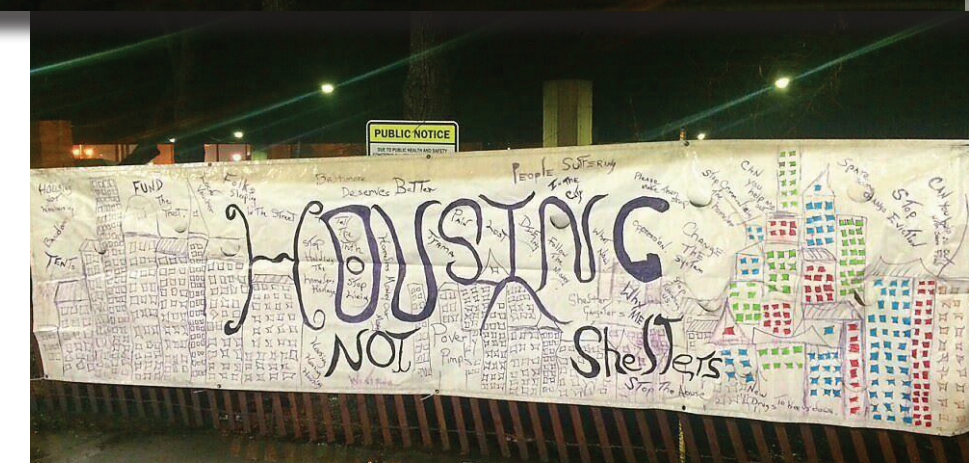
Acknowledging local housing needs in comprehensive and strategic plans

- Affordable Housing
- Permanent Supportive Housing
- Fostering community support for affordable housing as part of large development projects



Address emotional needs through scheduled and unintentional interactions with the unsheltered homeless

- Grassroots organizations
- Personal level



Encourage social community development through planned workshops

- Place It! Art based workshops (based in CA)
- Circle of Voices events (based in Baltimore)



Speak up for the unsheltered in the meeting room if a project seeking approval benefits or disadvantages them

Personal Examples:

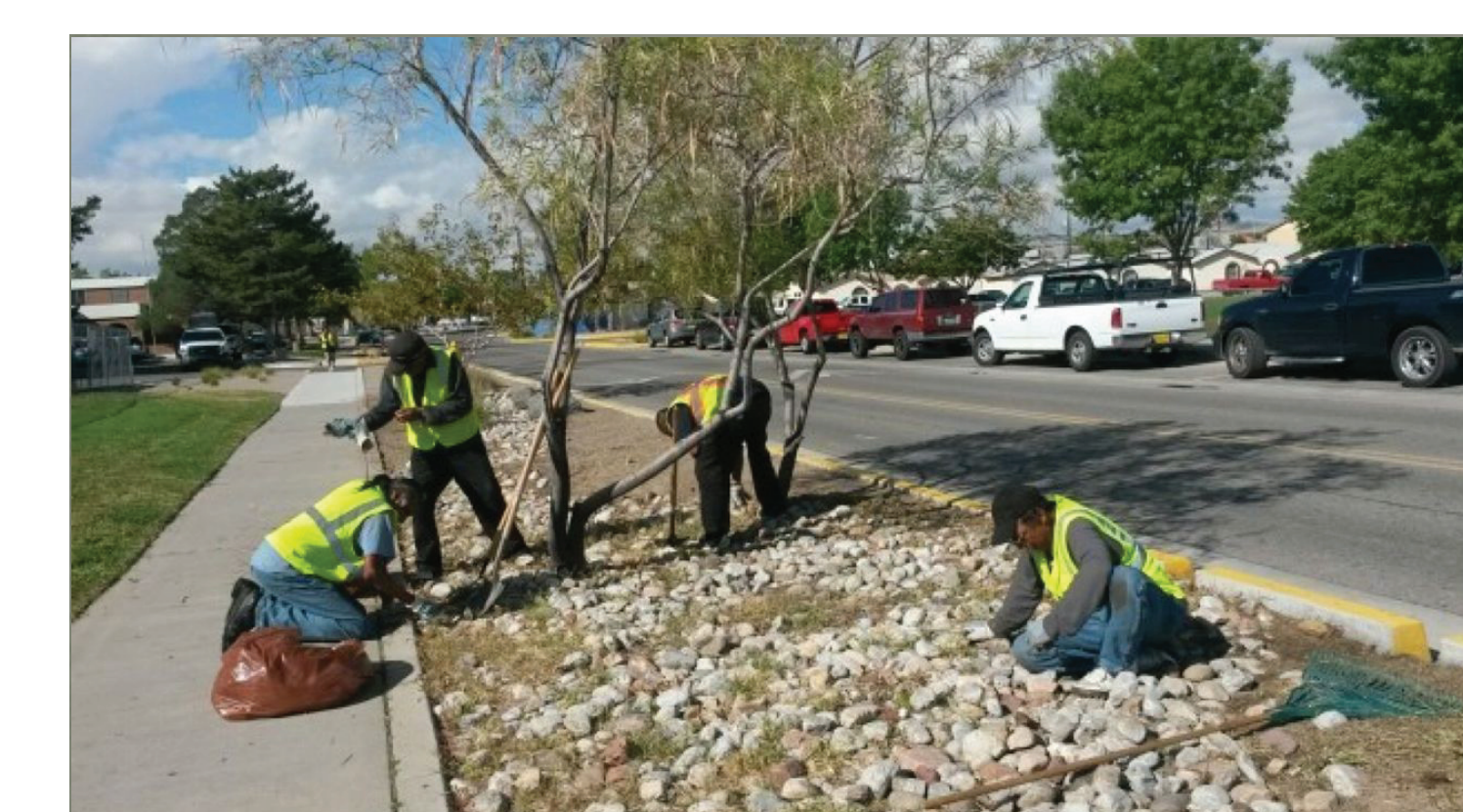
- MTA Pop-up at Lexington Market
- Advocating for loosening RV parking restrictions



2017 Mayoral Workgroup on Homelessness

Recommendations for City Officials

- Create a permanent city intra-agency council to improve communication
- Create an employment program that hires unsheltered homeless for day jobs beautifying the city
- Legitimize and manage encampments in the short term
- "Safe Zones"
- Maintain site cleanliness
- Access to bathrooms, showers, laundry, electrical outlets
- Ikea "Better Shelter" temporary dwellings



These two recommendations were included in Mayor Pugh's Violence Reduction Report Update, 8/11/2017

