

HEIDI MAYER

## Homeless, Starving Children: Americans Are in Denial

*Heidi Mayer is the executive director of YouthHope, a non-profit organization in Redlands, Calif., that provides services to youths aged 14-24, "to build confidence and promote self-sufficiency for homeless and runaway youth by providing trust, hope, support, and education." Redlands, a city of approximately 65,000 people, is located in San Bernardino County, about one hour east of Los Angeles. On Oct. 28, RealtyTrac ranked the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario region of Southern California as 6th in the nation in foreclosures, with one home out of every 41 having a foreclosure notice filed against it.*

*On Oct. 20, the Contra Costa Times reported that there were 22,658 homeless school children in San Bernardino County during the 2009-10 school year, an increase of 20% over the previous school year. Of that total, 2,883 homeless children were in the Redlands Unified School District.*

*YouthHope's goal, as stated on its website, "is to take the youth from the street to employment to becoming self-sufficient adults." Many of the youths that YouthHope helps are homeless, or at risk of becoming so, and otherwise often live in desperate conditions of poverty.*

*YouthHope found, in a survey of 106 youths be-*



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*tween July 2009 and July 2010 that 52% were homeless (they were sleeping under bridges, on sidewalks, behind bushes, etc.); 28% had lived or were currently in foster care; 59% had parents who were divorced; 40% had parents who had used drugs or were alcoholics; 37% were high school graduates; and 84% had tried to get off the streets, and were unsuccessful on their own.*

*Mayer agreed that too many Americans are not aware of the desperation in their midst. "There's a church," she said. "that, when I went to share the problems, and after I left, they talked among themselves, and they said this is not a problem, and they wonder how much money we're making off of this. I don't make a penny, and I dump tons of money into this program to help these kids. And so, people are very, very blind. They want to be in denial."*

*The problems Mayer addresses have been accentuated by draconian cuts to the state budget. (see EIR, Oct. 15, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/b9y65>).*

*Mayer was interviewed by Carl Osgood on Oct. 27.*

**EIR:** You've been working in the area of helping homeless young people for several years, right?

**Mayer:** I've been working with helping kids on the streets for the last seven years. I have focused more into



Courtesy of YouthHope

*There are a reported 22,658 homeless children in California's San Bernardino County; they have fallen through the cracks, and are nearly invisible to most Americans, who do not want to face the reality that a large portion of the next generation is being lost. These two young people were sleeping in a vacant field in Redlands, Calif.*

San Bernardino County in the last year. Before that I lived in Yucaipa, but I would take youth and we would go down to Venice Beach, Santa Monica; we'd go up to San Francisco, up to Portland, Ore. and Seattle, Wash., but I decided, instead of running all over the place, we need to be in one place, and that is, to work in one place and actually make a difference to get the kids off the streets.

So, we've become a nonprofit organization, Youth-Hope, and we have made our home in Redlands to work with kids. And we started off feeding kids a year ago, about 30 kids. We just feed on Tuesdays and Thursdays because I don't have a facility, and I need a place desperately, so I can actually do these kids more justice. At this point, we use a patio of the Methodist Church, which is amazing that they allow us to do that, on Tuesday and Thursday. When we started feeding the kids, we would average about 30. I am now averaging somewhere between 60 and 70.

### No Food in the Homes

**EIR:** So it's doubled in just a year.

**Mayer:** In one year it has doubled. Part of that is

hard times. Part of it is kids having trust in us. But what has opened my eyes so desperately, is when I have been on the streets in the past, the kids would more protect their parents, not let anybody know what's going on. I have four different families, and the kids are actually letting me in the homes, and there's no food in those homes, either. There's no food, and I have had a doctor look at me and tell me this kid is malnourished and he is starving to death. And that's a kid that's living in a home! But the mom volunteers that she can't get a job that's good enough to support her family. She's a single mom, and so she's doing her best, but there's no food in the house, and there's actually three kids that live in that household. We've now split them up, so she only has one of the three kids. She couldn't provide food because she doesn't have the money.

I have another kid and he's 17, and mom and dad cannot get a job, and so they left their apartment and they've moved into their car. But, again, there's three kids, and their car's not big enough for the five of them in the car, and so they've told the oldest, "We can't have you stay with us. We have no room in the car." And so he's on the streets, and so what he does is, he goes back to the last place he knows as home, which is the apartment, and there's a laundry facility there, and he sleeps in the laundry facility to be warm at night. And that's his closest feeling to being at home with his family. He'll meet up with his parents off and on throughout the week, but he can't concentrate to go to school, and that's a problem when these kids are on the streets.

A huge, difficult problem is, if you live in California, if you don't have your birth certificate, you can't get an ID. If you don't have an ID, you can't get your birth certificate. Parents are losing jobs and they're out on the streets, all their papers disappear. And now I've got youth that we can't get their IDs, and if you don't have ID, you can't get your Social Security card, and you cannot get a job or you can't go to school. So, it's a huge problem, growing and growing, that—okay, hang

on to your birth certificate. Hang on to your IDs. But again, when parents are hanging on, and they're hurting and they're struggling, that's just junk that they've got to discard because they don't know what to do with it, and they don't realize it's such a huge problem.

In high school, they're definitely willing to work with us, but trying to get a kid into a trade school or into a some type of college, means you have to have your ID, which means you have to have a birth certificate, which means you have to have your ID.

But the other problem, too, with these kids is, they're living in homes where the families are hanging on to the house but they don't have the food. We don't have bus systems to get the kids to school any longer because of the budget cuts, and so these kids are having to walk six miles at least, if not ten miles. It's a long way.

Because I don't have a facility, I'll feed the kids on Thursdays, which means they don't eat Friday, Saturday, Sunday. They have school on Monday, but they've got to walk 6 to 10 miles to get to school to get a free breakfast. But if you haven't eaten for a few days, you don't feel like walking, and so the kids aren't getting to school, which means, now, another day has gone by, unless we can get food to these kids. And it costs a lot of money to feed everybody, and to do this, and I don't have a place where I can keep these kids, and I'm driving hundreds of miles just to get food into people's homes and get kids to school. And I have been purchasing bus passes for the kids, at a cost of \$35, and parents don't have that.

So, what I'm seeing is, we're having a huge economic problem because the parents aren't working. They're not eating. The kids are not going to school. They're just sitting around. What's going to happen in five years? These kids graduate. They're out of school, or they're on the streets, but there's nothing for them to do. We can't get them a job, we can't get them job-trained. They can't read and write. It's a huge domino effect, and if we're not careful, I don't know. I don't know where the U.S. is going to end up. . . .



Courtesy of YouthHope

*Mayer's YouthHope organization has witnessed a doubling of the number of youth who are homeless and hungry, in the last year. Even children still living in homes are malnourished, with some starving to death; many face life-threatening illnesses with no hope of medical care. This homeless youth is sleeping near an abandoned building.*

### **‘I Do a Lot of Begging’**

**EIR:** So your biggest frustrations are food and getting the kids to school. The need is huge. It's obviously much larger than you're able to—

**Mayer:** Oh yeah. We're now feeding close to 70 kids. We have received two grants, and one grant is from The Children's Fund [of San Bernardino] and it's for \$5,000, so it's going to be here shortly. We can use that to purchase five bus passes a month. We get three Stater Brothers grocery cards and three Target gift cards for five months that I can use for food to purchase for the kids. And the other was the John Burton Foundation, and that was to help with our office equipment and that was \$15,000. So that was really neat. The rest—really, the community is doing the very best.

We have a lot of business owners helping. My husband works over hours to help support YouthHope. I'm working for free and doing what I'm doing. I don't take a penny. He's out there trying to come up with extra money, because we do sink a lot of our own money into helping the kids. I have a lot of people on board that will help our kids. We have a dentist. We have a doctor. We have eye care. What they are willing to do is, if I call



and say I have a kid that needs help, they will do that for us.

The kids' health has gone down terribly. The last time they were vaccinated was years ago. That costs the parents extra money. So that's another problem. They're not getting their vaccinations that they're asked to do, because it costs them money.

You don't have the dental care. I have kids that show up and their mouths are killing them. They have their wisdom teeth coming up. They have all this pain because the parents are not taking their kids in for dental care. So, we do this for the kids, and we help them, but people are going down, too. They're not getting their physicals. They're not doing the checkups. They're not getting the tooth taken care of. Their teeth are starting to rot out. I have kids that come up and they need glasses. They can't see the bulletin board, or they can't see the chalkboard any more, because they need glasses, and the parents don't have the money to take care of that issue any more. So, their medical needs are huge. I have been fortunate enough to find doctors and dentists to do those services for free for YouthHope, and what they cannot cover, because of private donors, we're hopefully able to take care of that.

Obviously, I need money, because it's just very, very expensive. I do beg. I do a lot of begging, because these are the things we do. I purchase food. I purchase glasses. I purchase medicine. We have a kid—he has extremely high blood pressure at age 17, super-high blood pressure. The doctors can't run tests to see why, because there's no funds to do that, but they do have him on high blood pressure medication. We purchase that for him, because the family doesn't have the money or the resources. And if we don't do that, the kid's going to die!

So, we're struggling and I go around and do a lot of begging. We don't have any extra money whatsoever. I don't have any paid staff whatsoever. Everybody that works with me is completely volunteer. And it's totally out of the goodness of their hearts.

**EIR:** So, basically all of the stuff that you and I took for granted when we were growing up, is the hardest stuff to get for all these kids.

**Mayer:** Including their parents being there and showing love, because the parents are struggling so hard, they're not there. They're not there to raise their kids. They're absent parents. If they can find a job that might be paying minimum wage, they're working

double hours, and so now you've got the kids raising themselves. I have two kids whose parents, moms—you have tons of single parents—I have two moms, and they're prostitutes trying to make money to live in a house. So, what is that doing to their kids?

## **America Is in a Huge Hurt**

**EIR:** One of the things is the psychological effect of all this on the kids.

**Mayer:** They're very, very messed up. It's a huge problem. It just keeps rolling, keeps happening, and that's what people don't look at. Besides the education and the work, you have the physical, you have the mental, and then, along with the mental, you have parents who are very angry and frustrated because they can't get a job. Well, now, I've got abuse because of what's going on. Our abuse rate is extremely high on these kids. Sixty percent of my kids have been abused. The kids on the street? Twenty-one percent of my kids have been sexually abused while they're living on the streets, and so once they get kicked out of the house, or they're trying to pull it together on their own, then they get sexually abused.

**EIR:** Which is traumatic.

**Mayer:** It's very traumatic. The parents of my kids and I know it: Because of hurt, that's what parents do. Forty-seven percent of the parents are either alcoholics or drug addicts. And so, they're turning to that, and people say, "Where do they get the money?" The drug dealers and whoever, make it very, very easy, and very, very cheap. So, now the kids, because the parents are hurting so desperately, now they turn to that, and then again, that's what happens to our kids.

America is in a huge hurt. And if it's not you going through it, it's your friend going through it. And the kids sit in school—. As I go and speak to different school districts, youth groups and whatnot, I tell the kids, when you go to class and the kid sitting next to you smells so terrible, it's probably because he hasn't had a bath for a week. It's probably because he's living in his car. It's probably because he's homeless. So, you need to have a different outlook on the kid sitting next to you. It's probably not just because he's lazy and doesn't bathe anymore. It's probably because he cannot get one. And, it is growing.

*Heidi Mayer can be contacted through her website, [www.youthhope.org](http://www.youthhope.org)*