

San Francisco eyes forced treatment for mentally ill addicts

June 4 2019, by Janie Har



In this April 26, 2018, file photo, a man lies on the sidewalk beside a recyclable trash bin in San Francisco. San Francisco supervisors consider legislation Tuesday, June 4, 2019, allowing the city to force mentally ill drug addicts into housing and treatment for up to a year. Mayor London Breed says it's inhumane to let addicts languish on the streets, but homeless advocates say the measure is extreme and a violation of civil rights. (AP Photo/Ben Margot, File)

San Francisco supervisors were expected to consider a proposal Tuesday that could force drug addicts with serious mental illnesses into treatment.

Mayor London Breed and other supporters of the proposal say the move—known as conservatorship—is necessary to help addicts who are often homeless and suffering from a mental illness, making them a danger to themselves.

They say the number of people who could be forced into treatment is small, likely fewer than 50.

Critics call the measure a violation of civil rights that runs against the principles of the liberal city. They also say San Francisco lacks the services and shelter to successfully expand the number of people in such a program.

Incomes are generally high in San Francisco, where the median price of a home is \$1.4 million and median monthly rent for a one-bedroom unit is \$3,700. But the city struggles with a growing number of homeless people—some with disturbing street behavior fueled by drugs, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

They shuffle from the streets to jail and psychiatric care, unaware they need steady treatment, sometimes dashing into traffic or screaming at strangers.

"Anyone who's been to San Francisco recently, either in our downtown or in the neighborhoods I represent, has seen an alarming number of people who seem to be mentally ill, or in some kind of psychosis, and they seem to be not getting the care that they need," said Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, a co-sponsor of the measure whose district includes the Castro.



In this Feb. 26, 2016, file photo, a number of syringes are scattered in the remains of a tent city being cleared by city workers along Division Street in San Francisco. San Francisco supervisors consider legislation Tuesday, June 4, 2019, allowing the city to force mentally ill drug addicts into housing and treatment for up to a year. Mayor London Breed says it's inhumane to let addicts languish on the streets, but homeless advocates say the measure is extreme and a violation of civil rights. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File)

State Sen. Scott Wiener, a San Francisco Democrat, co-authored the state legislation allowing the five-year pilot programs for forced treatment in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego counties.

The 11-member San Francisco Board of Supervisors has been divided on

the proposal. It has not yet been officially considered by supervisors in San Diego and Los Angeles counties.

The proposal would allow a court to appoint a public conservator for someone who has been involuntarily detained for psychiatric hospitalization at least eight times in a year under section 5150 of California's welfare and institutions code. The treatment could last for as long as a year.

San Francisco's public health department has identified 55 people who fit the definition and another 48 people who have been detained six or seven times.

The department has budgeted nearly \$400 million this year for mental health and substance abuse services and last year provided help to more than 25,000 people.

Last year, voters approved a tax on some of the city's wealthiest companies to raise money for homeless and mental health services. And this year, several supervisors are proposing a November ballot measure to guarantee mental health services for everyone.



In this March 1, 2016, file photo, San Francisco police officers wait while homeless people collect their belongings in San Francisco. San Francisco supervisors consider legislation Tuesday, June 4, 2019, allowing the city to force mentally ill drug addicts into housing and treatment for up to a year. Mayor London Breed says it's inhumane to let addicts languish on the streets, but homeless advocates say the measure is extreme and a violation of civil rights. (AP Photo/Ben Margot, File)

Jen Flory, a policy advocate with the Western Center on Law and Policy, which lobbies on behalf of poor people, said it's no accident that the most expensive cities in California are seeing more people with serious problems on the streets.

Her organization opposes the San Francisco measure, saying there are insufficient services available to make it work. She hopes people are offered outpatient services with fewer restrictions.

"These are very difficult people to house, but what works is to

continually try to work with somebody until something works," she said.
"We don't know of forced models that work."

Mandelman said most of the people targeted by the program are well-known to merchants, residents and staff at psychiatric facilities. Watching them deteriorate is heartbreaking, he says.

"They see them going from 'kind of not great' to being in absolute and complete distress," he said.

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Citation: San Francisco eyes forced treatment for mentally ill addicts (2019, June 4) retrieved 30 June 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-06-san-francisco-eyes-treatment-mentally.html>

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