



FPLG: BLOG

# From Urban Sidewalks to Community Solutions: A Few Thoughts on Homelessness and Urban Impact

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San Diego's homelessness crisis demands bold, local action. As a nonprofit attorney with a long history in San Diego, I share how place-based groups are leading equity-driven change.

This week I have been in San Diego, California helping our team at For Purpose Law Group (FPLG) settle into our new office space. As FPLG began in San Diego, and I spent the majority of my professional career as a San Diego nonprofit attorney, I've spent years working alongside San Diego organizations tackling everything from food insecurity to environmental justice. But during this visit, what struck me most had nothing to do with legal filings or growth strategy—it was the heartbreaking and undeniable visibility of significant **urban poverty** all around us.

Just blocks from our office, I saw tent encampments tucked between freeway on-ramps. People were sleeping on sidewalks. The need for urgent, sustained, and *locally-rooted* action could not have been clearer.

## Homelessness in San Diego: More Than a Housing Crisis

San Diego is facing one of the nation's most visible and complex homelessness crises. With [more than 10,000 people experiencing homelessness across San Diego County](#), the intersections of housing shortages, behavioral health gaps, and soaring living costs have created a perfect storm.



This crisis affects everyone—residents, businesses, service providers, and especially the nonprofit organizations doing the hard work on the ground. As someone who advises and represents many of those organizations in my work as a nonprofit attorney in San Diego, I’ve seen both their determination and their exhaustion. They’re stretched thin, and they need support—not just in funding, but in systems that actually work.

## The Case for Place-Based Nonprofit Solutions

There’s a growing recognition in the nonprofit sector that change doesn’t come from sweeping, one-size-fits-all initiatives—it comes from the ground up. Nowhere is this more evident than in cities like San Diego, where the challenges of urban poverty vary not just from neighborhood to neighborhood, but sometimes from block to block.

That’s why **place-based work** matters.

When nonprofits are deeply embedded in the communities they serve, they’re positioned to notice what outsiders miss. They see the subtle ways trauma lingers in certain public spaces. They understand why a public service might go unused—not because it’s not needed, but because it’s located on the wrong bus line, or operated by people residents don’t trust. They can see where the gaps are—between city policy and lived experience—and move quickly to fill them.

I’ve seen this firsthand in my work with nonprofits across San Diego. For example, the [Legal Aid Society of San Diego](#) and the [San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program](#) operate clinics directly within community hubs, offering eviction defense, small business support, and immigration help in neighborhoods like Logan Heights. These aren’t distant institutions—they’re woven into the fabric of the places they serve.

The [Community Law Project](#), run by students at California Western School of Law, brings legal pop-ups to places like City Heights, where services are culturally responsive and rooted in trust. The [UC San Diego Student-Run Free Clinic Project](#) partners with churches and schools across the region to deliver holistic healthcare—medical, dental, and legal—where uninsured and under-resourced communities actually live.

Even innovative housing solutions are being delivered with a place-first mindset. The [Safe Parking Program](#), operated by Jewish Family Service and Dreams for Change, transforms public lots into safe overnight spaces for people living in vehicles—complete with hygiene access, case management, and housing navigation. This isn’t just a shelter solution. It’s a dignified, trauma-informed approach tailored to San Diego’s unique needs.

These organizations don’t just serve a community—they **belong to it**. And their work reminds us that effective nonprofit leadership starts not with sweeping promises, but with sustained presence.

## From Relief to Equity: Rethinking Nonprofit Impact

Emergency services—meals, shelter, hygiene access—are absolutely vital. No one questions that. But if we want lasting change in how we address homelessness and poverty in San Diego—or any urban center—we have to go beyond emergency relief. **We must build toward equity.**



This means rethinking how nonprofits show up—not only as service providers, but as policy advocates, coalition-builders, and co-creators of structural solutions. It also means reimagining how funders and legal advisors support that evolution.

Groups like the **Regional Task Force on Homelessness (RTFH)** are already shifting how the region responds. By unifying data, aligning service providers, and facilitating collaboration across sectors, they're helping move our collective focus from short-term outputs to long-term systems change.

Funders, too, are adapting. The **San Diego Foundation**, **The Conrad Prebys Foundation** and **The Parker Foundation** are leading examples of institutions embracing **trust-based philanthropy**—offering unrestricted grants, supporting capacity-building, and funding organizations led by and for communities of color.

This matters. Many of the most impactful place-based nonprofits—particularly those working in historically marginalized neighborhoods—have long been under-resourced. They don't need more reporting requirements. They need deep investment in their vision and leadership.

At FPLG, we work with clients every day who are navigating this shift: restructuring boards to reflect lived experience, aligning missions with advocacy goals, and creating legal frameworks that allow them to innovate while staying compliant. This is what sustainability looks like—not just surviving, but leading boldly and equitably.

## What Supporters Can Do Right Now

If you serve on a nonprofit board, lead a foundation, work in city government, or simply care about building a more equitable San Diego, the good news is this: there are immediate, concrete ways to get involved in **place-based solutions to urban poverty**—and do it in ways that honor the work already happening on the ground.

### 1. Fund locally—and fund flexibly.

Support groups like **Mid-City CAN**, **Youth Will**, or the **Community Law Project**—organizations that have built real relationships in the neighborhoods they serve. And offer **multi-year, unrestricted grants** to give them the stability and autonomy to grow their work on their terms.

### 2. Back coalitions—not just programs.

Support cross-sector collaboration through efforts like **RTFH**, where housing agencies, legal experts, and outreach teams are aligned toward a regional strategy. These coalitions are the future of nonprofit impact.

### 3. Invest in nonprofit infrastructure.

Help organizations modernize operations, strengthen governance, or bring on legal support that lets them focus on mission rather than red tape. This is behind-the-scenes work that makes frontline services possible.

### 4. Show up with humility.

Visit a **Safe Parking lot**. Sit in on a community-led policy meeting. Listen to a youth organizer from **Youth Will** talk about what real safety and opportunity look like. The closer you get to the work, the



more informed—and impactful—your support will be.

### Some Final Thoughts

My return to San Diego this time was more than a logistical move—it was a personal reminder of why this work matters. The visibility of suffering in our urban spaces is not just a policy issue or a funding dilemma. It's a moral and civic challenge. And one we all have a role in meeting.

As a long time nonprofit attorney in San Diego, I'm proud to support the legal and strategic needs of those doing the hard work of social change. But more than that, I'm committed to amplifying their voices, challenging outdated systems, and building a more just region—alongside the people who've been in this fight far longer than I have.

Cities are complex. Communities are resilient. And change is possible—when we stay rooted in place, in partnership, and in the belief that everyone deserves a safe, dignified place to call home.