“Bet you didn’t know what you were getting yourself into.”

Shannon Stevens, an intake specialist at the Maryhouse women’s shelter, glanced at me and then worriedly across the room toward a woman in pink.

A pink sweater. A pink scarf, trimmed rhinestones and glitter to match the rings on almost every finger. This middle-aged black woman was stylish. If you saw her on the street, just strolling along a sidewalk in midtown Sacramento, you’d think she was a government worker on a lunch break.

“She took a bunch of pills,” Stevens said, “because she couldn’t take sleeping outside anymore.”

“You’d never know the woman in pink was chronically homeless.

On Monday morning, she was hunched over in a chair in the intake office on the verge of tears. She has been staying at the Salvation Army shelter, one of only a handful in the city that accepts single women, but was keenly aware that her time there was running out. Thirty days, with a 10-day extension or two. That’s all you get. Then it’s back to the streets.

The woman in pink, whom I agreed not to name, has been working with Maryhouse at Loaves & Fishes to get permanent supportive housing. But the list is long and getting to the top of it takes time. Time the woman in pink, who has cancer and a host of other health problems, didn’t think she had left to give.

So she took a bunch of pills from her purse and swallowed them with a cup of water from the Maryhouse lobby.

“I don’t want you to worry about housing, OK?” an intake specialist said as paramedics helped her stand. “You’re still on this list.”

“They’re not gonna call,” she whimpered, shaking her head. “They’re not gonna call.”

For the past month, Sacramento has been locked in a renewed debate over the city’s urban camping ban. Homeless activists pitched their tents outside City Hall on Dec. 8 and have been daring police to arrest them ever since. And last week, the morally driven hacker group Anonymous purportedly joined the fray.

Not that it has mattered much. City officials, including a new mayor-appointed task force on homelessness, are still plugging along, understandably looking for the right balance between short-term and long-term solutions.

Meanwhile, others in the broader community continue to wrestle with questions such as: Is it really safe to let homeless people camp outside? How about humane? Should police arrest or fine people instead? Is this a “criminalization” of the homeless or, given the enormous amount of trash and biohazard of disgustingness that homeless campers leave behind, is this more of a public health issue?

These are valid questions, but each one misses the point. And the point is, whether Sacramento has an anti-camping ordinance on the books or not, homeless people will continue to camp outside in tents and under makeshift tarps.

Some will do so because, as one Maryhouse employee told me, they like their freedom.

Far more will do so because they have health issues, such as agoraphobia or untreated paranoid schizophrenia, that make it easier to stay outdoors than to share a bunk in a crowded shelter. It’s not just because they’re picky.

If you don’t believe me, go watch 45 women, short-tempered from living outdoors and unable in some cases to hold a coherent thought for more than 30 seconds, try to share four showers at Maryhouse. Let’s just say arguments are common.

But most homeless people who find themselves outside in a tent night after night will be there because they’re in a situation like the woman in pink.

They camp because they have no choice. They do it because right now in Sacramento there’s nowhere else for them to go.
go around. The wait for permanent supportive housing is far too long.

Until Sacramento officials address this very fundamental issue of supply and demand, spending time and energy debating the merits of the city’s camping ban is rather pointless.

The threat of that ordinance doesn’t make a difference to the 45 women who showered at Maryhouse on Monday morning before heading back to their tents. And it wouldn’t have made a difference to the woman in pink if she had found herself on the streets Monday night instead of in a hospital room.

“I’m tired of living like this!” she started screaming as the paramedics loaded her into the ambulance. “I’m tired of living like this!”

She shouldn’t have to.

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It was on Good Friday when Derrell Roberts, co-founder of the Roberts Family Development Center, told me how he felt about weed. Specifically, an initiative on the June ballot that will ask Sacramento voters to approve a 5 percent tax on commercial marijuana cultivation.

The money, as much as $5 million a year, would be set aside for programs for at-risk youth, including for early childhood education, tutoring, gang diversion and arts activities. Programs that his Roberts Family Development Center in Del Paso Heights always struggles to fund.

Sounds good, right? Except for the part about illegal marijuana grows in residential neighborhoods being magnets for violent crime.

“I just know this,” Roberts said, leaning forward. “Marijuana got a lot of black men put in jail. And if I can use marijuana to keep young black men out of jail – and that’s where I’m at now – then that’s what I’m going to do.”

Up until that moment, I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what I found so intriguing about a pot tax in Sacramento and, at the same time, what I continue to find so troubling about other, larger efforts to bring the drug into the mainstream.

It’s not that I’m a hater. I support legalization. Because of this long march toward saner drug policies, few people in California get thrown in jail for years for smoking or possessing small amounts of weed anymore. The stigma of the drug is going away, too, as more people begin to see it for what it is: a freakin’ plant. Even my aging mother, with her aches and pains and her tendency to trip and fall, now swears by the medicinal qualities of cannabis oil.

But for all of the positive steps that California and other states have taken, there has been unfairness, too. A recent investigation by Buzzfeed, which, in addition to time-sucking, mind-numbing online quizzes, actually produces some good journalism now and then, makes this point all too clear.

It found that “fewer than three dozen of the 3,200 to 3,600 storefront marijuana dispensaries in the United States are owned by black people.” That works out to about 1 percent.

That’s a percentage so low that it should be criminal. Instead it’s a percentage that’s largely ignored by the overwhelmingly white politicians, lobbyists and Silicon Valley investors who are driving the public policy conversations about cannabis, and how and by whom the industry should be brought from shadows into the light.

The people hurt most by the decades-long war on drugs – poor black people and brown people – are being locked out, forced out, bought out and even fearfully opting out of an industry that is one of the fastest growing in the country.

California already brings in about $1 billion a year for medical marijuana sales. If voters approve a November ballot initiative to make it legal for recreational use, the added sales could more than double the national market for legal weed – currently estimated at $2.7 billion.

With all of that money floating around, one would think someone, somewhere would keep official statistics on diversity within the industry. But no.

To come up with 1 percent, Buzzfeed conducted more than 150 interviews with dispensary owners, industry insiders and salespeople who do business with a lot of pot shops.

I haven’t conducted anywhere close to that many interviews on this topic, but based on what I’ve heard and what I’ve seen, Buzzfeed’s findings definitely ring true.

Just wandering around the Emerald Cup trade show back in December, the lack of people of color among the growers was striking. Panel discussions on diversity focused mainly on getting more women into the trade, a noble cause as well. But given that the annual festival is billed as “the Oscars of the cannabis industry,” it should’ve been nicknamed #EmeraldCupSoWhite.

It’s not that black and brown people aren’t getting involved with legal cannabis at all. Snoop Dogg sells it. So does former NBA All-Star Cliff Robinson, and Tommy Chong, of ’70’s and ’80’s stoner fame, is hawking products, too. But they are few and far between.

Part of the problem is policies. Many states make it tough for anyone with any kind of criminal record involving drugs to take part in the legal industry. Given that black people comprise about half of the more than 2 million Americans behind bars – a rate nearly six times the rate of whites – and many of them because of policies from the war on drugs,
that’s a problem.

In California, Proposition 47, which reduced some nonviolent drug felonies to misdemeanors, helps. But there are still some questions about people with felony records being able to participate in the medical market. The language in the November initiative, the Adult Use of Marijuana Act, is better than what other states offer, but can be confusing, especially when compared to the more restrictive rules under the current medical pot law.

Also part of the problem is that discrepancies remain in how drug charges are meted out, even in states that have legalized marijuana. Several studies show that black people are still more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people, even though both races use the drug at similar rates. In Colorado, for example, blacks get busted for possession more than twice as often as whites do, despite accounting for only 4 percent of the state’s population.

This has to change. And yet it’s one reason why Roberts shrugs off the possibility of commercial marijuana growing being zoned for some of the seven inner-city neighborhoods where his center offers after-school, preschool, mentoring and counseling programs.

“They’re already here,” he said of the growers.

The question is how can the neighborhoods around them use what they’re doing for the good of the broader community. The question is how can the city bring them out of the shadows and into the light, maybe with some police protection for business owners instead of police raids for criminals.

Even if Sacramento voters decide against a pot tax, and there are plenty of reasons to do so – namely that ballot box budgeting can tie the hands of government in a crunch – you have to admit there’s some serendipity here. That the same drug that led to the destruction of so many families in so many Sacramento neighborhoods could, years later, save those same families and those same neighborhoods.

Really, it’s only fair.

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As details emerged Monday about the Baton Rouge shooting – how police were targeted and ambushed by an angry black man with a rifle – the Cleveland officers keeping the peace at the Republican National Convention didn’t flinch. They looked on passively as a black woman rambled into a microphone for 10 minutes about how her son was killed by police and how police should have found a more peaceful way to subdue him.

They didn’t even smirk knowingly when the woman, squinting into the sun and suddenly noticing that she was surrounded by men in uniform, offered a hasty caveat. “Ain’t every police bad,” she said, her voice carrying across a sparsely populated plaza, aptly named Public Square. No one applauded. But someone did shout, “No justice, no peace!”

Police officers are in hell right now – now that angry, unhinged black men are resorting to vigilante justice, setting traps for anyone with a badge. It happened first in Dallas, where a sniper killed five officers during a Black Lives Matter rally, and now in Baton Rouge.

It’s not much of a stretch to think the same could happen in Cleveland.

That makes for a special kind of hell for black police officers patrolling this city’s streets on foot and on bicycles, and protecting protesters even when they’re carrying signs that insist all cops are “racists” and “killers.”

I have two friends who are police officers – one in Cleveland, one in the suburbs. Both are black men with black sons of their own. We’ve known each other since we were kids, back when we, too, mouthed off to police officers trying to order us around.

As much we disagree about the value of Black Lives Matter and racial bias in policing, I have a lot of respect for what they do. “I couldn’t do your job,” I’ve often said. And they know it’s true.

I asked one of my friends, whom I agreed not to name because the department is troubled and, therefore, understandably closed-lipped, if he’s worried about working this week. Like all Cleveland police officers, he’s pulling 12-hour shifts for seven days. He also has a wife and three kids. He shook his head. “Protesters want to cause a ruckus. They don’t want to take a life. I don’t see this week as any different as any other. What they’re doing in Dallas, Baton Rouge, they can do that anytime. Baton Rouge, that was a regular day for them.”

Is he scared? He shook his head again. “You don’t think, ‘Oh, somebody is trying to kill me.’ I don’t know. You just expect them to. It’s normal. It’s a given.”

He works on the east side of Cleveland, which isn’t exactly the south side of Chicago, but it’s not great. It’s not unusual to get calls about toddlers being murdered; teenagers getting shot in the head; and bodies of adults found in cars, mutilated by bullets and forgotten.

“Life’s cheap in the neighborhood,” he said.

“ ‘They want to rally on us about Black Lives Matter? You need to address that.’

Bring up Black Lives Matter, and that’s what I get. Anger.

Anger that the activists are missing what he thinks is the bigger issue. Angry that he regularly has conversations with black people at gunpoint, and sees black people when they’re shot, stabbed or beaten, usually after doing something criminal and stupid.

Angry that a couple of black men, who were angry over some of the same things that Black Lives Matter is angry about, ambushed cops. Angry that the shooters are making it easier to paint – with broad brushstrokes – the activists as dangerous and a threat, which only dilutes their message, alarms police and makes it easier for divisive, opportunistic politicians such as Donald Trump to get elected.

And I suspect within that anger, there’s more than a bit of embarrassment that now he has to pay the price – not only as a cop being potentially targeted like other cops, but as a black man.

Because he is a black man. And cop or no cop, he knows. “You can see both sides of the equation. I’ve been on both sides of the equation,” such as the foot chase he led police on in high school.

“Even now I know, when I’m out and about and I’m in regular clothes, that I’m just another Negro. The other thing is I’m a Negro with a gun. So, I always have my badge and something, like this band,” he pointed to the blue band on his wrist, “to give them a hint.”
His words echo a Facebook post by Montrell Jackson, the only black Baton Rouge officer killed Sunday. Days earlier and days after a fellow officer shot Alton Sterling outside a convenience store, sparking protests, he wrote: “In uniform I get nasty hateful looks and out of uniform some consider me a threat. I swear to God I love this city, but I wonder if this city loves me.”

The words accompanied a picture of Jackson holding his brown-skinned, infant son.

There is no “us against them.” There’s only us.

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The first time I saw Desiree Salazar, I was pretty sure it also would be the last time I saw her. Breathing anyway.

I figured I’d pick up a copy of The Sacramento Bee one day and see a story about how the woman with “F--- CPS” tattooed on her neck had been found dead, maybe under a tree on the American River Parkway or in some dingy hotel room with a needle still stuck in her arm.

That’s how bad off Salazar was in December when we met at a midtown Starbucks to talk about her son Sivam Lekh. At only 5 months old, he was the youngest person to die without permanent housing in Sacramento County last year.

Technically, Sivam passed away a few, heartbreaking days before Thanksgiving in 2014. But it was close enough for homeless advocates, who decided to read his name aloud during a memorial service for other, mostly wizened people who had died in shelters or on the streets.

Salazar had nothing to do with Sivam’s death – he died of SIDS in foster care – but she had a lot to do with the sad status of his short life.

In long, rambling sentences, she recounted how they bounced from shelters to the streets to apartments with dangerous men. Her face was scarred with freshly picked scabs, the black tattoos on her cheeks and forehead making her appear an

Desiree Salazar has the name of her son Sivam tattooed on her forehead. He died at 5 months old while in foster care after he was taken by Child Protective Services in 2014. Earlier this year, she moved off the streets and into housing with drug treatment services.

Homeless mother of Sivam Lekh works her way to second chance

With stable housing and services, Desiree Salazar hopes to move away from a violent past that led Child Protective Services to take away her son.

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almost sickly yellow. Decades of trauma, mental illness, drug addiction and homelessness had obviously taken their toll.

Public records show Salazar has been in multiple abusive relationships, has been arrested multiple times and has had multiple children removed by Child Protective Services. Sivam was one of those children – removed after she tested positive for pot and meth, violating her probation.

His death sent Salazar over the edge with grief and rage at CPS. She became suicidal and, with nowhere else to go, was sleeping on the banks of the Sacramento River. She hoped the lights from the trail on the Yolo County side would protect her.

“I felt like dying every time I slept out there,” she said.

Many people would call Salazar a lost cause, someone who doesn’t deserve help. And I can certainly understand the anger on behalf of little Sivam. But with so many chronically homeless people living in Sacramento and other cities across California, many of them broken since childhood, with big mistakes making their lives even harder, giving up isn’t really an option.

The men and women who spend years sleeping under the same bridge, and have rap sheets a mile long for things like drug possession, public intoxication and illegal camping – people who’ve burned many bridges in their lifetimes, and now rebuff or blow every shot at getting help – they’re like the walking dead, and society treats them as such.

But Salazar is a survivor, with the survivor’s guilt to match.

Her road to redemption was long and twisted – she says it began with the attention that followed being in The Bee – but today, she is living at Martin Luther King Jr. Village, a gated permanent supportive housing complex in south Sacramento.

She has a small, one-bedroom cottage all to herself. She attends Narcotics Anonymous classes. She takes shots to keep her anxiety and other mental disorders under control. She owns a dog and often takes care of a friend’s dog most days. They guard her like pit bulls, even though they’re tiny balls of fluff.

The change is remarkable. Conversations with her aren’t as disjointed. She dislikes but no longer hates CPS, and her skin is starting to clear up. She has goals. And this is only after a few months.

“Now that I have a house, I go to therapy, I go get my shots, and instead of being put back out on the streets and have to suffer that way, I get to come back in here and lay down. I can shut the world out.”

She paused, shaking her head. “Some people think it’s hard to believe after such a long time, but I can’t go back to that.”

Desiree Salazar

“SOME PEOPLE THINK IT’S HARD TO BELIEVE AFTER SUCH A LONG TIME, BUT I CAN’T GO BACK TO THAT.”

Services, “but I don’t plan to stay longer than two years.”

And those tattoos – “F--- CPS” and “CPS Killer” on her neck, and the names of her children, including “Sivam” on her forehead.

“I recently asked my doctor, what about tattoo removal? Now that I’ve been clean and sober for a minute, I’m looking at myself, and I know I must have been really high to think scarring my face like this would give me any kind of compensation for my son dying or my children dying.”

Photos of Sivam, blowing spit bubbles through a grin or staring with wide-eyed curiosity, are on every wall in Salazar’s apartment, shrine-style. She says it helps her cope. It helps her stay clean. I say whatever works.

Some might say Salazar isn’t worth saving. Or they assumed, as I did last December, that she’d probably never get this far. But Salazar is proof that, with the right help at the right time, even lost causes can be saved.

It’s still a little unreal to her.

“Just recently, I ate at Joe’s Crab Shack and I started crying,” Salazar said, describing her view from the restaurant’s windows across the Sacramento River. “I was just sleeping over there a couple months ago, and now I have a house.”

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On Monday morning, Robert Mann stood in the grass of an empty lot on Del Paso Boulevard, trying, as raindrops began to fall, to find the right words to describe his disgust with the “renegade police” who tried to run over his younger brother, Joseph. Failing, they shot him, 14 times.

“This disgraces the oath that you took,” he spat into a bank of microphones.

It’s hard to begrudge Mann his anger. Thanks to enhanced audio from dashcam videos that the Sacramento Police Department never wanted to release in the first place, we now know the despicable details of how Joseph Mann, mentally ill and holding a knife, died in July.

Officers John Tennis and Randy Lozoya tried to hit him with their cruiser – not once but twice. They sped onto the scene, interrupting the efforts of other officers who had been trying to de-escalate the situation.

“I’m going to hit him,” the driver said, according to court papers. “OK, go for it,” his partner responded. When that didn’t work, they chased Mann on foot.

“We’ll get him,” one said.

Within a few seconds, they had fired 18 rounds, striking him 14 times.

So now, in addition to suing the city, the Mann family has taken the extraordinary step of asking the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate the case and the Police Department as a whole.

“This was outrageous conduct, and there has to be a price to pay,” their attorney, John Burris, said.

It is extraordinary because it’s Sacramento – a city that prides itself on being liberal, diverse, measured and, above all, nice. Many people never thought we’d be where my hometown of Cleveland is after officers killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was playing with a toy gun in a park. Or Baltimore after the in-custody death of Freddie Gray. Or, most of all, the racially divided city of Ferguson, Mo., after the shooting of Michael Brown.

But here we are. And as I listened to Mann vent to reporters Monday, all I could do was shake my head and lament how so much of this just didn’t have to happen.

Setting aside for a moment whether officers did or did not have to kill Mann (they didn’t), the Sacramento Police Department could have – and should have – been a lot more forthcoming to other city officials and the public about what happened.

Questions about the July 11 shooting arose almost immediately in the community, but Chief Sam Somers Jr. stupidly stuck to the department’s policy and resisted calls to release dashcam videos of the incident to anyone.

It was only after The Bee’s Anita Chabria got hold of surveillance video from a private citizen that the department hastily released footage – and even then no one mentioned the damning verbal exchange between Tennis and Lozoya.

It was only after the Sacramento News & Review reported on the audio from one of the dashcam videos – and The Sacramento Bee did the same – that what really happened to Mann became abundantly clear.

Even the City Council was left in the dark – again, something that really didn’t have to happen. Several members have told The Bee that the first time they heard about police trying to hit Mann was when news reports surfaced Friday. Councilman Allen Warren called that “extremely alarming.”

To suggest the Police Department didn’t know about the audio on the dashcam video is far-fetched. And if indeed no one did know, then what does that say about the competency of the department? Or the veracity of the information that has been turned over to the Sacramento County District Attorney’s Office to determine whether charges should be filed against Lozoya or Tennis?

The department’s stubborn stonewalling and unnecessary silence also raises some serious questions about the culture of the city’s police.

Tennis and Lozoya had to be pretty comfortable in that culture to talk about hitting a mentally ill man when they knew a camera was rolling. And if they felt that comfortable, what other bombs are in hidden dashcam videos from other cases that the department won’t release to the public?

Same with the officers the department employs. Tennis, we now know – and not because the Police Department has been forthcoming – has been involved with at least two cases alleging excessive force. The first one, in 1997, led to a man’s death from a chokehold. The second one, in which Tennis was accused of false arrest or imprison-
ment, cost the city $10,000 in a settlement.

If all of this is true, why is he still on the force, on “modified duty” after the Mann shooting? And is he truly only one bad apple, or are the department’s policies and procedures so porous and the penalties for violating them so inconsistent that many officers engage in questionable behavior?

Because of the revelations about the Mann case, we now have to ask these questions.

Understandably unnerved, Mayor Kevin Johnson and the City Council have vowed to force the Police Department to implement a series of reforms. Among them, pushing additional training for officers on dealing with mentally ill suspects and requiring dashcam videos to be released in a timely manner. The council also is contemplating a policy that would authorize deadly force only when there’s an immediate threat and the shooting is “unavoidable to protect life.” That should have been the policy all along.

The political push for change is valuable, and it’s one that Mayor-elect Darrell Steinberg has vowed to continue. But I’m afraid it could prove to be too little, too late.

If the Justice Department does indeed decide to investigate the Mann case and the Police Department as a whole, it could find, heaven forbid, that Sacramento officers regularly violate people’s civil rights.

If that happens and if the Justice Department pushes the city into a consent decree to reform the department under the oversight of a federal monitor, taxpayers can expect to pay through the nose to fix it.

As of last year, there were more than 20 police forces under consent decree. Some cities have had to raise taxes to cover the cost. Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake says she expects her city to fork over between $5 million and $10 million. Cleveland is on the hook for about $11 million.

Knowing that Sacramento is moving in the right direction, implementing reforms, some might question why we need the Justice Department’s involvement at all. It certainly would be embarrassing.

“We have to make sure something like this doesn’t happen again,” said Stephen Webb, president of the Sacramento chapter of the NAACP. “Unfortunately, it’s going to cost the city some money, but that’s the way these things tend to go.”

Or as the Mann family’s attorney, Burris, put it, “trust but verify.” Consent decrees are court orders, not promises.

This is what happens when public trust in a police department is edging toward rock bottom. That, too, didn’t have to happen.

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