

Homeless Activist Following MLK's Lead

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“Poverty is a violation of Economic Human Rights”

Oakland – Fourteen community activists from the Bay Area are planning to join thousands of others from across the country on Saturday in the nation's capital for the 40th anniversary of the historic march led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1963, the civil rights leader delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech before tens of thousands. In 2003, the issue, according to activists, has shifted from civil rights to economic rights – the right to have a job, decent housing, schools, and health care. Seven of the activists are from Oakland, the others are from San Jose.

On Thursday, supporters held a press conference at St. Mary's Center in Oakland, a social services agency for the homeless. They said they are getting support from laid-off teachers, health care workers and families who lack health care insurance, and government employees hit by budget cuts.

The California delegation to Dr. King's Poor Peoples March is being supported by the center, the Oakland –based Women's Economic Agenda Project, and the Community Homeless Alliance Ministry of San Jose, according to organizers. They plan to join others Saturday and set up a so-called Resurrection City made up of a “non-violent, multiracial army of the poor.”

Organizers said after Dr. King organized lunch counter sit-ins to bring civil rights to blacks, he realized those protests meant little if people could not afford to eat. “Poverty is a violation of economic human rights,” said Carolyn Milligan, an executive with the Women's Economic Agenda Project. “With all the budget cuts and unemployment there are more people suffering,” said the Rev Scott Wagers of the First Christian Church, San Jose. “There are people in my church who used to make \$70,000 a year but now are homeless,” he said.

Jose Querdo, 61, of Oakland will not go to the rally Saturday but he supports its goals. “I was homeless for six months in 2001,” he said. “The issue today for people is not begging for food on the street but getting housing,” He went to St. Mary's Center for Housing and other assistance and is now enrolled at Merritt College.

“I support the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act that was reintroduced this year by (Congresswoman) Barbara Lee (D-Oakland),” he said. The law calls for more housing for low-income households.