

Few Turn out for March on City Hall,
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Of the roughly 75 people who marched on City Hall Sunday to demand better health care, affordable housing and higher wages for low-income women, most of them were organizers and supporters from Oakland. Less than 10 were from Vallejo.

The low turnout did not surprise Vallejo's human rights advocates who say many residents and some government leaders do not want to face the city's homelessness and poverty.

"I would like to have seen more people here," said Vallejoan Carla Surber, a member of Solano Peace and Justice Coalition, a group that lobbies for economic and social reforms. "I don't see these issues at the front of Vallejo's political agenda."

Advocates like the director of a Vallejo homeless shelter do say that city leaders have been helpful in the past. They have tried to secure affordable housing grants and allocate existing funds for social betterment programs. But human rights watchers say more needs to be done, he said.

Gripping a bullhorn, Christian Help Center's executive director Ray Bernardes shouted, "We cannot turn our eyes, ears, and hearts away from the needy. There is a compassion fatigue in our community."

Jeannie Villarreal project coordinator for Vallejo's Fighting Back Partnership, helped to promote the event rally. She said information about the rally was published in the newspaper and forwarded to civic leaders. Yet, few Vallejoans turned out.

The city allocates 20 percent of the grant money it receives annually to creating low-income housing, said Mayor Tony Intintoli, Jr., speaking from his home on Saturday. He said no one informed him about the event.

"Had I known, I would have come," he said, noting the city's connections with Fighting Back, as well as a local low-cost health care network and children's support center.

Villarreal said sometimes the causes and signs of homelessness are not immediately apparent, however, and require the community's help to find practical solutions.

"Many of the homeless have mental health issues and until those are resolved," she said. "We don't take into account people who are sleeping on friend's couches."

With affordable housing more difficult to locate in the Bay Area than perhaps in any other part of the country, human rights workers say women who do not earn enough to pay rent certainly can-not afford health insurance.

That social imbalance is exactly why Ethel Long-Scott and her team from Oakland-based Women's Economic Agenda Project planned the eight-day march, which started Aug. 26 in San Jose and will move to Richmond today.

Long-Scott said she was not disappointed by the Vallejo turnout.

"Every movement is a beginning," she said of her 20-year -old WEAP network. "We follow the path of Elijah Lovejoy and Harriet Tubman, who were pacifists. They would not respond with respond with violence, but wouldn't leave until they found converts."

Long-Scott and marchers who chanted, "Housing, health care, living wage" seemed to convert drivers passing by City Hall. Supporters cheered the many motorists in minivans

and station wagons who blew their horns in response to the group's "Honk to End Poverty" sign.

Along with rally co-sponsor Community Homeless Alliance Ministry, WEAP is currently lobbying for a Congressional measure called the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act. It preserves, or in some cases creates, 1.5 million units of low-income housing. Seventy-five percent of that space is earmarked for the nation's poorest families, who earn less than 30 percent of the average median income in their area.

"There's a myth about homelessness in the United States," she said about opponents who say many destitute people simply do not want to work. "Poverty is a silent epidemic. Forty-three million people have no health insurance - 6.7 million in California. Helping our fellow human beings is all of our responsibility."