**March 22, 2023 / Homeless veterans**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN <Waiting In The Street - APM>

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): Some Los Angeles residents had a problem. For various reasons, they had become homeless. But, as some of them would later point out, they all had experience dealing with tough situations.

RYAN HIGGINS: I’m a combat medic, first battalion, fifth marines.

JOHN 2: I was in the Air Force, I did two years.

NOEL: They had all served their country.

SCOTT MAREK: Army, yes. I was trying to be everything that I could be.

NOEL: They all lived on a sidewalk outside of the Veterans Affairs building / in one of LA’s fanciest neighborhoods.

And there, they’d run right up against the V-A, the police, the wealthy neighbors. And they’d attract some supporters.

*<CLIP> Tara Brennan: I feel like this is a gift from God, that this is something I can help so much, so close.*

NOEL: Anna Scott, a reporter for KCRW in Los Angeles covered what happened next. What it tells us about homelessness, and resilience, and American priorities.

It’s not all bad news. Coming up on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

**[THEME]**

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*, I’m Noel King. Anna Scott covers homelessness for the public radio station KCRW in Los Angeles. Now, LA has been at the center of this country’s homelessness crisis for a long time.

ANNA SCOTT (KCRW reporter): Well, it is still a crisis. Still have something close to 70,000 unhoused people all over Los Angeles County. In the city of L.A., we have a new mayor, Karen Bass, who has declared this a priority and launched a new program to try to get people off the streets quickly.

*<CLIP> Karen Bass: It is a humanitarian crisis that takes the life of five people every day.*

ANNA: But that is still in the early stages and it is still very much a crisis.

NOEL: Anna’s the host of a new podcast from KCRW called “City of Tents: Veterans Row.” It’s about a rather unusual encampment of unhoused military veterans.

ANNA: So the camp isn't there anymore, but the podcast tracks its rise and fall throughout 2021. And this was in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in L.A., in Brentwood…

NOEL: Hmm.

ANNA: …which if you don't live in L.A., maybe you've heard of Brentwood because of the O.J. Simpson case, perhaps.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vxRKlDX7K8)*> News 10: Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were found stabbed to death outside her Brentwood condominium on Sunday night…*

ANNA: It's a very ritzy area, not a place that 10, 15 years ago you would have seen large encampments, but they had a very big one, one of the biggest in Los Angeles, that was full of unhoused military veterans throughout a lot of 2020 and 2021.

NOEL: Paint me a picture. I lived in Los Angeles for a couple of years. I remember Brentwood very well. It is hard to imagine a homeless encampment in that part of LA.

ANNA: Yeah, this is how I started on this story in the first place, because it was so eye-catching. I was getting all of these phone calls and text messages from people asking me what was going on in Brentwood. So I went to check it out. And If you're coming into Brentwood on San Vicente Boulevard, which is this big six lane street that kind of loops into the commercial heart of Brentwood. And right there on a very long block, across the street from upscale restaurants and condo buildings, was this huge encampment, about 40 big 10-by-14 matching identical camping tents with matching identical three-by-five American flags pinned to the front. A very key thing about the location, it was also right beside a huge Veterans Affairs medical campus. And it's enormous. For people that don't live in L.A., this is about half the size of Central Park in New York City.

NOEL: And when we say military veterans were living there, what does that mean? Who were the kind of people that you met reporting on this?

ANNA: There was a Navy veteran in his sixties named John Raposa, who was one of the very first people that I met there who told me a lot about the culture of the camp and the camaraderie that existed there and the reasons that he was there.

*<CLIP> John Raposa: I'd feel really, really lonely right now in an apartment by myself. Yeah, I really would. And I'd be like, yeah, like suicide watch, you know, really bad. So out here it's like, I got friends, you know, I'm surrounded by people 24/7. We don't always get along and it’s a lot of drama. But I'm not alone.*

ANNA: There's another veteran who I followed over quite a long time, also in his sixties, a Navy veteran named Jeffrey Powers.

*<CLIP> Jeffrey Powers: My feeling is, if I'm going to be in a tent, I'd rather be in my own personal tent where I can sit naked if I want to. You can bleep that out if you want to.*

ANNA: Jeffrey had a real odyssey in the time that I was reporting. When I first met him he was staying in a program on the VA campus. But he felt like when he was there, there were a lot of restrictions that made him feel like he was being punished.

*<CLIP> Jeffrey Powers: I find this frequently, when in situations where it's government help is that their mindset is not that of somebody from the perspective of the hospitality industry, but rather from the penal system. And it's really annoying, because I'm not a criminal. I'm just homeless.*

ANNA: And then there were younger people that camped there as well. And actually there was one real main organizer at this camp who became a key source in this story.

*<CLIP> Rob Reynolds: I had a, you know, PTSD and had some substance issues, as far as I'll go into it. And that was really just untreated PTSD. I'd never been to therapy before. So that did lead to some self-medicating.*

ANNA: His name is Rob Reynolds. And he's in his early thirties and served in the Army and deployed to Iraq in 2007.

*<CLIP> Rob Reynolds: And it just goes to show, a lot of people do show up here and, if they get the right counseling and treatment — and I can attest to this myself, you get the right counseling, treatment, understand how to deal with PTSD and your issues — that you can get better and you can go back to your normal life. It's worked out for me great and that's why I come out here and try to work with these guys because I want the same thing for them.*

NOEL: Why was there a camp located right next to the VA and not on the VA grounds? Like why not just bring these guys inside?

ANNA: Very logical question. What I found was that there was a real revolving door between that VA campus and this encampment outside. A lot of the people who were at the camp, nicknamed Veterans Row, had been in programs on that VA campus. There are different rehab programs there. There are shelters there. Some people went back and forth a lot. And most of the people at Veterans Row saw doctors on that campus, had appointments there regularly, so they wanted to be close to it. Now, there's also quite a long involved history to that campus, which was also relevant to the encampment and why it ended up on that block.

SCORING IN <#DoYourJobDoSomeResearch>

ANNA: The land was donated more than 100 years ago to the federal government by a wealthy widow to be a home for disabled soldiers. At the time, this was a couple of decades after the Civil War, and this country actually had a whole system of what were known as soldiers' homes. All around the country, there were these campuses where veterans lived and had health care and had community. So it was that for a long time. There were thousands of veterans living there at one point.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqGp9OvO7oM)*> Rob Reynolds, Fox 11: Prior to Los Angeles becoming our nation’s capital to veteran homelessness, nearly 5,000 veterans lived on this property. And today there’s only a couple hundred and an estimated 4,000 homeless veterans. So if you do the math here, I mean…*

ANNA: But over the years, we abolished that system of homes and the modern VA emerged, which does health care, benefits, cemeteries. And the campus today really reflects that. It's mostly a medical campus. There's a hospital there. There is a small amount of housing. And then there are things on the campus that have nothing to do with veterans at all. The VA leases part of the land, for example, to UCLA for a baseball field or to another local private high school for athletic facilities.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqGp9OvO7oM)*> Fox 11: In 2013 a federal judge voided a whole list of leases including UCLA’s as illegal. Then in 2016 Congress passed legislation giving the VA authority to lease West LA land including to the university. But there are catches. Among them, the lease must benefit veterans.*

ANNA: A group of unhoused veterans represented by public interest attorneys sued the VA, saying, you can't lease this land out to things that have nothing to do with veterans. It was donated to us. And they actually had a court victory that resulted in the VA agreeing almost seven years ago now to build 1200 units of affordable housing on that campus for unhoused veterans.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: The VA promises to build 1,200 units. How many are up now?

ANNA: A very small fraction. Right now they have only about 113 units open, as we're having this conversation.

NOEL: Huh.

ANNA: There are two more buildings that are supposed to open this year, but they were supposed to have more than half of them done by now. So they're very behind.

NOEL: Why’s it taken so long?

ANNA: Well, the infrastructure is outdated and the VA has to upgrade that. They had to do environmental studies, you know, typical sort of bureaucracy that makes things move slowly. But I found in my almost two years of reporting on this that another reason has to do with money. For a long time, the VA didn't budget a single penny for this plan that it agreed to.

NOEL: Hmm.

ANNA: And that was a stumbling block.

NOEL: Okay. So seven years ago, a promise is made. We will build 1200 units. We're not even close to that yet. When does this encampment get started?

ANNA: So it gets started not long after the pandemic hit, so around March of 2020. And actually, the VA itself kind of created an unintentional precursor to Veterans Row because when the pandemic hit, they created what they called a safe campground on that property. So a place where unhoused veterans could come and just quickly take shelter in tents, get three meals a day. But their encampment had these little tents that veterans would have to crawl in and out of. And there were some people in the neighborhood who saw this and thought it was kind of pathetic, especially on this property where unhoused veterans were supposed to have housing by now.

NOEL: Yeah.

ANNA: So one of those people was a local Vietnam veteran who tried to donate a large tent to the VA. So he went and he said, look, if you're going to have them in tents, at least give them tents that they can walk into, not these little pup tents. But the VA rejected the donation. So he took that large tent out to the sidewalk, gave it to an unhoused veteran there, and that was the very beginning of Veteran's Row. It grew from there. More people started donating the big tents. And because this was all starting during the height of COVID, law enforcement didn't come through and break it up like they likely would have prior to 2020.

NOEL: How many people lived there in total?

ANNA: At its height, it was close to 50 people.

NOEL: And you go down there to report on it for KCRW. And so what is it like?

ANNA: The first day that I went, you know, I saw veterans hanging out between tents, they were cooking. They had a kind of order to life there that had a military flavor. So they had assigned chores to different people like firewatch at night. They had these little grills and things like that that they would cook with outside. I mean, these were very big tents. Some of them had living room setups inside of them. They had generators going. I mean, it really felt like a community. Now, that said, it was also chaotic. There were people struggling with different issues. There were two homicides at the camp in the time that I was reporting there…

NOEL: Hmm.

ANNA: …which we cover in the series. So I don't want to make it sound like this perfectly orderly utopia. But there was a lot of camaraderie. It was a real community. It definitely had its rhythms, and it definitely had a military flair.

NOEL: Okay, all of that sounds all right, but I imagine that people in Brentwood who own homes there or who rent homes there were not thrilled about this. What did you find?

ANNA: You are correct. People were not thrilled about this. It took up an entire sidewalk. There was the noise of the generators. Sometimes at night, people would fight. There were these two violent incidents there, which the victims in both cases were unhoused veterans who lived at the camp, not just people walking by in the neighborhood. But nonetheless, that this violence had occurred was very disturbing to people who live nearby.

NOEL: And so who represents the housed residents of Brentwood. Who is the person that speaks for the neighborhood?

ANNA: Well, in the series, I spoke quite a bit with Michelle Bisnoff, who was at the time the head of the Brentwood Community Council, which represents mostly homeowners and business owners in Brentwood. Because of her position, she'd been receiving complaints from a lot of people that lived really close to the encampment. And she was very active in trying to find ways to dismantle the camp and get it off of that sidewalk.

NOEL: How did Michelle and others go about trying to do that?

ANNA: They invited the sheriff at the time of L.A. County, Alex Villanueva, to one of their meetings. This was a Zoom meeting in 2021 and essentially asked him to intervene. Now, Villanueva at the time was running ultimately unsuccessfully for reelection, and he really seized on the frustration that a lot of people all over L.A. feel about homelessness. He ended up sending in a special team of deputies that deal with homeless encampments.

NOEL: What did they do?

ANNA: They began what they called an assessment. Going one by one, talking to people at the camp, trying to match them with services, and then eventually putting an end date on the camp and, you know, breaking it up. That's how they described their process. I mean, really what they ended up doing in reality was more just being, frankly, a presence there that worked as a walking talking clock that said we are going to break this up on November 1st. This was 2021. So this is the day sanitation crews are going to come in and take down these tents.Now, what ended up happening, though, that really defined how this all ended was there was a second homicide there. And this gets the attention of the Biden administration. And at the time, the relatively new VA secretary who’s still the VA secretary, Denis McDonough, he says, hey, what is going on in Los Angeles and comes out for a visit.

*<CLIP> Denis McDonough: This visit underscores a fundamental fact, which is that we think that any homeless vet is too many, any one homeless vet is too many.*

ANNA: He visits Veterans Row, he takes a tour, he walks up and down the block with Rob, the main organizer of the camp, chats with some of the veterans.

*<CLIP> Denis McDonough: Okay. Are you taking care of yourself?*

*Rob: I am.*

*McDonough: Are you getting three squares?*

*Rob: I am. Yeah. Yeah.*

*McDonough: You're sleeping?*

*Rob: I'm sleeping. Yeah. Out here busy though. That's what I want to get. So many stuff fixed, so Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Can definitely make it easier. All right. Yeah.*

*McDonough: Okay. [Thank yous, off-mic goodbyes]*

ANNA: And about a week later, back in Washington, D.C., at a press conference, he announces...

*<CLIP> Denis McDonough: We're going to get the vets currently living on Veterans Row into housing by November.*

SCORING IN <floe>

ANNA: After the VA secretary's visit, local VA leaders really knew that they had to scramble and come up with some solutions. And so what they did was allow volunteers to build an identical encampment that everybody called Veterans Row 2.0 on the other side of the fence, on that VA campus, with the same flags, the same big tents. Now, it wasn't housing, so cheating a little to say that they fulfilled this promise of everybody getting housed by November 1st. But most of the veterans from Veteran's Row ended up moving over the fence. It was a big improvement in their quality of life. On the campus, they get three meals a day. They're much more safe. There’s security there, they have closer access to social services. So it was an improvement.

SCORING BUMP

ANNA: Today, most of the veterans who are on Veterans Row are still in temporary shelter, not necessarily in tents anymore, but in temporary shelter. But some number have moved into permanent housing and a larger number expect to when some of those new buildings open later this year at the VA campus.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Coming up after the break: what was LEARNED on and from Veterans Row.

SCORING OUT

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

ANNA: All the way back in 2010, under President Obama, this country started a very big and ongoing push specifically to house homeless veterans.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQe5P2k9Ius)*> President Obama: We're not going to stop until every veteran who has defended America has a home in America. That's a basic commitment that we have to uphold. (applause)*

ANNA: And we have actually seen quite a bit of success with that. The success has been less dramatic since about 2015, 2016. But it has been ongoing. And that was true here in L.A., too. We had a lot of progress in cutting veteran homelessness between 2010 and about 2016. But here in L.A., unlike other cities around the country, we have really been stuck since then at about 4,000 veterans in L.A. County, even as other cities around the country and other counties have ended veteran homelessness altogether.

NOEL: If we were to look nationwide, what would it cost to get homeless veterans housed more broadly?

ANNA: It's hard to put an exact dollar amount on it. Other cities and counties around the country outside of L.A. have ended this problem of veteran homelessness, specifically. And here in L.A., we have some unique challenges that have gotten in the way. The biggest one being our incredibly expensive housing market. Rents have gone up a lot in recent years, which makes it easier to become homeless in the first place and also much harder to use things like rental vouchers because landlords can usually just make more money renting to the highest bidder. One of the reasons that I even took on this story in the first place, though, is because veteran homelessness, unlike homelessness in general, feels like it really should be solvable. Even in L.A. County, 4,000 unhoused veterans, compared to the larger crisis, it's not that many, and it feels like we do have the resources and the systems in place where we should be able to at least end the crisis for this one sliver of people.

NOEL: What is the federal government doing to solve this problem nationally?

ANNA: Well, the push that started under the Obama administration, recently President Biden has declared that this is a priority again.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2023)*> President Biden: Helping veterans afford the rent, because no one should be homeless in America, especially someone who served the country. [applause]*

ANNA: Some of those efforts weren't continued during the Trump administration. And also that administration just had a generally different philosophy on how to address homelessness.

NOEL: Mmm.

ANNA: That did affect some of the policies. But the current administration is saying that they're prioritizing it once again. I mean, the jury's still out, certainly here in Los Angeles. We haven't really seen the numbers budge for a long time. And that didn't change with our most recent point in time count. But they're saying that they are doubling down on those things. And nationwide, there has been a decline over the last couple of years. So we'll see what happens in Los Angeles in the coming years.

NOEL: Anna, you've been covering homelessness for seven years now. You spent a considerable amount of time down on Veterans Row looking at this very specific situation, but maybe a situation that is not entirely unique. What is the lesson that you take from the story of Veterans Row, both what worked and what didn't?

ANNA: Well, I think that Veterans Row was a microcosm for the larger veteran homelessness crisis. But then veteran homelessness can be this interesting microcosm or case study that can teach us things about how to solve homelessness more broadly. So there's no reason that the things that have worked to help unhoused veterans couldn't work for non-veterans. Veterans are not any easier to house, you know, inherently or anything like that. They just received more assistance. And so…

NOEL: Hmm.

ANNA: …we've seen the numbers go down quite a lot. Now, there's no reason in theory that we couldn't extend some of the policies that have worked for veterans to non-veterans. Like Congress could, again, in theory, fully fund Section Eight, for example, for everybody so that there's no more lottery. So it's just if you're eligible, you get a voucher. That would be a big boost for people who can't afford rent. We could, in a place like L.A. County, hire an army of social workers, bigger than the LAPD, to do street outreach and match people to resources. Now, when you put it like that, of course, it sounds very pie in the sky. It would be very expensive to do these things. But in theory, they're possible. These things that have worked for veterans could work for everyone. It's just the scale of what you would have to do makes it very daunting.

NOEL: I hear you saying that when we pass unhoused people, homeless people in the street and we look at them and we think, Oh my God, this has been going on for so long, there is no real solution to this. I hear you saying, no, there is. We do actually know how to fix this. We do have solutions. What it's going to take is commitment. And what it's going to take is money.

ANNA: Yeah, and I don't want to minimize, of course, how hard those things are. There was a study very recently that quantified for the first time what it would take to end homelessness in just California in terms of dollars. And it was eight billion dollars a year for 12 years.

NOEL: Wow.

ANNA: So that's a huge amount of money. Now, also, along with that, we'd probably need an entirely new social contract because generally speaking, we've been able to pass these measures for veterans because people across the political spectrum agree that veterans deserve something back from government, from taxpayers. They deserve assistance. That's not really true of everybody else. So I don't want to minimize how hard, you know, getting the will and the money to make these things happen would be. But maybe there's even some downsized version of some of the things we've done for veterans that you could do for everybody.

SCORING IN <Neutral Irene>

ANNA: One of the takeaways that I really want people to have is that this is not an intractable problem. It's not a mysterious problem. We do know the causes of it. Mostly at the root of it is housing affordability and housing availability. And we do know the things that work to fix it. And veterans are just one case study. But applying those things more broadly comes with a huge amount of challenges.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That’s Anna Scott. She’s the host of KCRW’s new podcast “City of Tents: Veterans Row.”

Today’s episode was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Matthew Collette. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard and engineered by Patrick Boyd. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**