UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

February 6, 2024
Andrea Estrada

Is housing a human right?

By some estimates, more than 180,000 people in California lack stable housing. It's a pervasive issue, impacting virtually every community in the state — Santa Barbara County included — and stretching from one coast of the United States to the other.

It's also a contentious issue as lawmakers, government officials and organizations seek solutions to what many argue is a full-blown humanitarian crisis, while also trying to understand and address the often-complex circumstances that lead to homelessness.

At the heart of the issue lies an important question: Is housing a human right? If so, the state faces some major challenges. How, for example, can low- and moderate-income housing be built in the face of high construction costs and sometimes fierce community opposition? And how can people currently experiencing homelessness be relocated to existing shelter and housing?

These are among the topics a panel of experts will explore as part of UC Santa Barbara's 2024 Arthur N. Rupe Great Debate. Presented by the College of Letters and Science and co-presented by the campus's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) and UCSB Arts & Lectures, the event will take place Tuesday, Feb. 13, at 7:30 p.m. in Campbell Hall. It is free and open to the public.

The Arthur N. Rupe Great Debate Series brings together eminent figures who hold divergent viewpoints to examine contemporary societal issues of national and international significance. Those participating in this year's debate are:

• Andy Bales, the former president and CEO of Union Rescue Mission, a faith-based homeless shelter in Downtown Los Angeles

• David Garcia, the policy director for the Terner Center for Housing Innovation at UC Berkeley, where he leads the center's engagement in local, state and federal housing policy

• Rasheedah Phillips, director of housing at PolicyLink, a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity

• Eric Tars, senior policy director at the National Homelessness Law Center, where he leads the development, oversight and implementation of the center's policy advocacy agenda.

The debate will be moderated by award-winning radio talk show host Larry Mantle, whose program AirTalk with Larry Mantle, broadcast on NPR member station LAist 89.3, is the longest-running daily talk program in Los Angeles radio history. Since 1985, its guest roster has featured leaders in politics, entertainment, science, health, social debate, history and the arts. Mantle also hosts the movie review and interview program Film Week.

"As California's spending on homelessness increases, so does the number of residents living on the streets or in vehicles," Mantle said of the issue at hand. "It has left the public frustrated, as large-scale visible homelessness continues in much of the state.

"My hope for the upcoming Rupe Debate is that our audience comes away with a better understanding of the complex causes of homelessness and some optimism about ways of increasing shelter beds, permanent housing and supportive services."

Added Susan Derwin, director of the IHC and a professor of comparative literature, "The Interdisciplinary Humanities Center strives to foster civic empowerment through programs that advance knowledge about shared human experiences. This year's Rupe Debate will bring together a panel of experts to explore the economics, politics, policies and issues that aggregate around the question of housing as a human right.

"We hope this timely discussion will expand the audience's understanding of ways to address this national crisis," she said, "which has had — and continues to have — a

direct and strong effect upon the wellbeing of our community.”

Media Contact

Shelly Leachman

Editorial Director

(805) 893-2191

sleachman@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

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