

She persisted: After chilly entry to San Francisco, disability specialist now on three city commissions and living happily in senior housing.

Description

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Terry Bohrer didnâ??t get the warm welcome she had hoped for when she moved to San Francisco. Like many new arrivals, she found the city a tough place to make friends. She and her husband joined clubs, took adult classes, and even threw parties in their apartment â??to no avail. â??We were lonely,â?• she said. She couldnâ??t even land a volunteer spot she thought would be a good fit.

â??Volunteering in San Francisco can be really difficult,â?• she said. With more than three decades of professional experience in issues related to mental health and disability, she thought sheâ??d have something to bring to the cityâ??s Mental Health Board, which advises supervisors on policy and the efficacy of the numerous programs it supports. But, â??they blew me off,â?• she said, having applied twice with no response.



Terry Bohrer is on three city commissions. (Photo courtesy of Terry Bohrer.)

But that was the past. Bohrer is now 82 and living in a senior community where she says she has â??250 friends.â?• Sheâ??s also a member of three city commissions, including the one she tried to join 12 years ago. Itâ??s now called the Behavioral Health Commission.

She also chairs both the Shelter Grievance Advisory Committee, which advocates for users of shelters when they face eviction or other penalties, and the Crisis Intervention Team Working Group, which works with the police department to develop better methods of dealing with people in crisis. She said sheâ??s seen a culture shift in attitudes, though â??initially, officers didnâ??t like it.â?• However, critics of the department still believe the shift is far from complete.

Although Bohrer is pleased with her work with the police and the shelter group, she has little positive to say about the Behavioral Health Commission.

â??Nothing changesâ??

â??It seems to take ages and ages before anything happens and nothing changes,â?• she said. â??My voice isnâ??t heard.â?• Her frustration is understandable â?? sheâ??s used to getting things done. Sheâ??s held numerous policy-making positions on the East Coast and worked with Steny Hoyer, a Maryland Congressman, now the House majority leader, on what in 1990 became the Americans with Disabilities Act.

One of her most serious is what she sees as poor oversight of San Franciscoâ??s mental health programs. Although there are at least 130 sites run by a plethora of providers, the commission is

required to visit just five every year. â??It barely seems adequate,â?• Bohrer said. â??With 16 members (the 17th is a member of the Board of Supervisors) youâ??d think we could easily make more visits.â?•

But four of those seats, including the supervisor slot, are currently vacant, through expirations or resignations. Also handicapped by the pandemic, the commission only managed two site visits last year. Could the commission have made virtual visits? Bohrer thinks so, but Geoffrey Grier, the executive director, rejected the idea. He said the myriad of rules regulating that type of visit was far too burdensome.

Bohrer is not alone in her criticism of the commission. In 2020, the executive director retired after it was discovered she had failed to file invoices for approximately $40,000 of expenses. Also that year, the Department of Public Health and the FBI launched investigations into a federal loan obtained by the San Francisco Mental Health Education Funds, a nonprofit that funnels city money to the commission. Supervisor Catherine Stefani resigned from the commission, saying she believed the loan was improper.

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No evidence of wrongdoing has been discovered â?? itâ??s not clear if the FBI and the health department are still investigating â?? and the commission is now headed by a new executive director. â??Things were a mess,â?• conceded Grier, the new executive director. â??But weâ??re getting past it,â?• he said in an interview.

Enacting the ADA

Bohrer had a comfortable and rather conventional life as a nurse and a doctorâ??s wife. A native of Queens, N.Y., she earned a registered nurse certification and worked at New Yorkâ??s prestigious Mount Sinai Hospital. She met her husband, Norman, then an internist serving in the Army, and accompanied him to a posting in France where â??I mostly ate pastries and rode horses.â?•

Returning to the U.S., the couple lived in Washington D.C. where she worked as a nurse, taught nursing, and had a daughter. The family moved to Bowie, Md., where Norman joined a medical practice. She soon had three more daughters. â??They were born in a Catholic hospital, and the nurses would joke, â??see you next year,â?? even though Iâ??m Jewish,â?• she said.

Bohrer worked in her husbandâ??s practice for a time, but â??I got tired of being the complaint department.â?• She wanted to expand her education. At that time, the 1970s, an RN certificate was not considered a college degree, and she wanted one. But getting a degree in nursing would have meant starting over with a year or two of basic courses, she discovered. â??I wasnâ??t willing to do that. It was time to change careers,â?• she decided.

She did. And the five years of additional education and a series of progressively more responsible jobs in public policy prepared her for a new role â?? advocate and whistleblower in San Francisco.

After earning a bachelorâ??s and masterâ??s degrees in social strategy and community planning, she volunteered for a local politician who became the county executive of Prince Georgeâ??s County in Maryland. He gave her a job as a coordinator for programs for people with disabilities.

Hoping to make services for the disabled more accessible, she worked with Hoyer on the Americans with Disabilities Act. When the ADA became law, she helped develop a program to make county building codes comply with it. The largely male contractors who wanted exemptions underestimated her, she said.

A too-early retirement

â??They figured the little woman wonâ??t be hard to beat.â?• They were wrong. Building codes in the county became some of the toughest in the nation, she said, with a touch of pride.

She paused her career to run for a seat in Marylandâ??s state senate. â??I had a wonderful time; loved every minute. Loved having to study up on issues.â?• But her pro-choice campaign was opposed by the Catholic Church, and she lost a close race to a long-tenured Republican incumbent.

She became director of mental health for Prince Georgeâ??s County. But after nine years on the job, her husband suffered a stroke, prompting her retirement. â??The day after my retirement party I woke up and said to myself, â??Now what am I going to do?â??â?•

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The answer: build a consulting business, write grants, and help organizations develop disability programs. The business was a success. But in 2010 she was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer and decided to move temporarily to San Francisco to be near two daughters living in Northern California, a move that became permanent.



Terry Bohrer travels extensively and collects handcrafted masks on her journeys. (Photo by Bill Snyder.)

Bohrer and her husband found an apartment with postcard views of the city and the Bay on Nob Hill. Eager to make friends, they invited the neighbors to a Halloween party in their apartment. Only a handful showed up. They took a bridge class and enrolled at the Fromm Institute. Still no friends. â??People were very clannish,â?• she said.

Overcoming isolation

The enviable apartment wasnâ??t enough to make up for the isolation. After a good deal of research, they moved to a senior complex near Pacific Heights. â??Suddenly we had 250 friends,â?• Bohrer said.

Given her many years of working on disability issues, Bohrer decided to volunteer on the Mental Health Board. But two trips and phone calls to then-Supervisor David Chuiâ??s office were fruitless. In retrospect, Bohrer admits, her assertive East Coast-style may have been a turn-off for the staffers. â??I

was pretty overbearing. They were probably glad to see me leave.â?•

She persisted and eventually managed to get an interview with Chui, who quickly agreed to give her a seat on the board, which sheâ??s held since 2016.

By 2020 it seemed like the commission was barely functional. According to its 2020 annual report:

â??As of this writing (June 2020) only two Commissioners out of 17 has legal standing, five seats are vacant (including the Board of Supervisors seat), three have termed out (each had two two-year terms) and seven Commissioners are waiting reappointment.â?•

Making matters worse, the executive director, Helynna Brooke, was behaving erratically, according to Bohrer and Marylyn Tesconi, who was then chairwoman of the commission. The two commissioners discovered Brooke had not been filing invoices and were concerned that the money may have been misappropriated. When confronted, Brooke said she had been suffering from a bout of depression and wasnâ??t able to handle the paperwork. She retired after accounting for the money. â??I donâ??t believe I misused anything,â?• Brooke said at the time. â??Was I good at the accounting and invoices this past year? I wasnâ??t. Thatâ??s different than misusing.â?•

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Bohrer and other commissioners were also angry when they found that Brooke had approved a $25,000 loan to the San Francisco Mental Health Education Funds. The money came from the Paycheck Protection Program, which was designed to give loans to businesses that would otherwise have to lay off employees due to the pandemic.

Accommodating an illness

But the Education Fund was fully funded and did not need to lay off employees. Angered, Supervisor Stefani resigned, but the loan was forgiven by the Small Business Administration. Neither the Department of Public Health nor the FBI would confirm the status of the investigation.

Bohrerâ??s ongoing fight with cancer makes it difficult to leave home, but she comes across as upbeat and engaged. Sheâ??s tech-savvy and has no trouble attending commission meetings via Zoom. Aside from her civic duties, she teaches a class for her neighbors on jewelry making, a longtime hobby, runs a small jewelry business and will sell her work at a show in her apartment in time for Valentineâ??s Day.

She fought a lot of battles and hasnâ??t always won. But reflecting on her life in public service, Bohrer is proud of what she has accomplished. â??When I reflect back, I did some really good things, maybe not in the whole world, but in my world.â?•

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