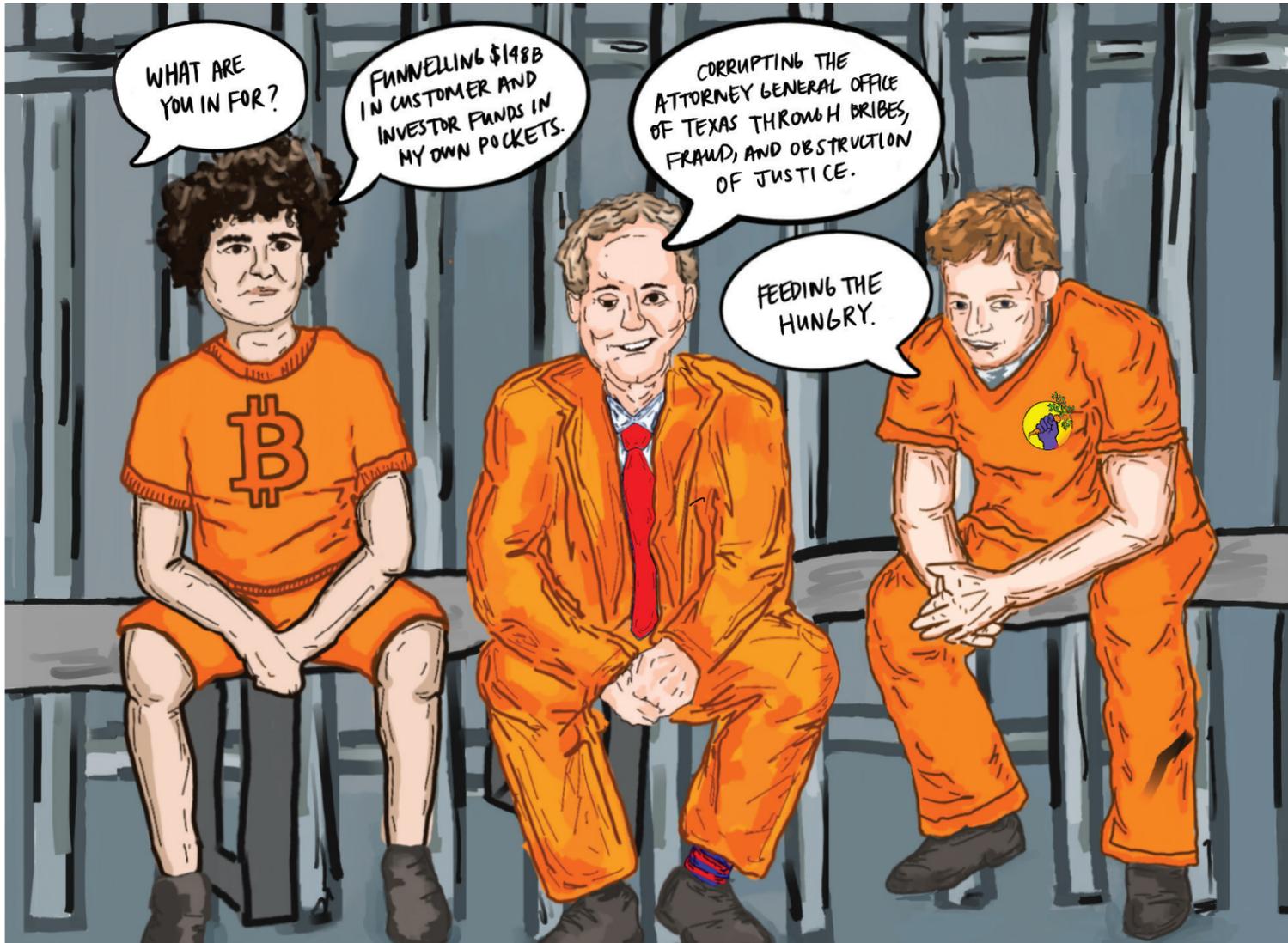


Vote. Somebody's next meal depends on it.



Story by Dalia Sandberg
Editorial Cartoon by Elise Anderson

Feeding people should not be a crime. Yet the City of Houston is making it one, prohibiting volunteer organization Food Not Bombs from serving meals to homeless individuals in front of the Downtown Public Library.

Food Not Bombs shares healthy, vegetarian meals to homeless individuals in over 1,000 cities in 65 countries. The group distributes dinner four times a week.

I have devoted four years to this organization, standing among them, and discovered that what's right often means challenging the law, potentially resulting in citations or arrest.

Volunteering with Food Not Bombs was the first time I had interacted face-to-face with people in need. Many of these individuals had not had a meal all day. They were primarily men, but there were a few women and children.

My father and I brought 100 pieces of roasted broccoli and cauliflower, anticipating that this amount would be sufficient. But soon, our tray was empty, and it was clear that we had not brought enough vegetables for everyone in the line. We needed to bring more food, but it was too late.

When I got home, I cried into my pillow because I was so sad and angry about the injustice occurring in the world. I have volunteered with the organization weekly since then.

Houston has a problem. According to the City of Houston, there are 3,223 homeless individuals and approximately a million people hungry.

The group began to encounter opposition to their work in 2012 when the City of Houston enacted a policy ironically called the Charitable Feeding Ordinance. It prohibited bars, people and organizations from distributing food to five or more people in need on public or private property without approval from the property owner. However, former mayor Annise Parker (2010–2016) allowed Food Not Bombs to continue serving food in front of the Houston Public Library.

Eight months ago, a bombshell hit. The City of Houston announced that Food Not Bombs would no longer be allowed to serve at their downtown location. In Nov. 2022, Mayor Sylvester

announced in his State of the City address that the City was to “retake the Downtown Central Library to make it more wholesome and inviting to families and to kids” and that “we have a few too many homeless folk and feeding programs in front of Central Houston.” Mayor Turner, in multiple tweets, claims that congregating homeless people discourages visitors from going to the library. Critics claim that the timing was curious – since the City began enforcing the law weeks before it hosted the NCAA Men’s Basketball March Madness Tournament.

In Feb. 2023, city workers placed a notice on the intersection of Smith and McKinney, stating that volunteers “run the risk of violating the law.” Houston Police Department designated a new location in front of the Houston Police Property Room on Riesner a couple blocks away, offering hand-washing stations, port-a-cans, trash receptacles, electrical outlets and volunteer parking.

Remember that voting has consequences.

— DALIA SANDBERG —

The problem with moving to the new location was that, as volunteers pointed out, it might discourage homeless people from attending because they fear the police. After much discussion, volunteers decided to ignore the new ordinance and continue serving in front of the library.

On Mar. 1, the first night that Food Not Bombs violated the ordinance, a crowd of concerned citizens assembled to protest threats from the City. Numerous video crews from local news stations documented the entire exchange. Volunteers arrived with signs bearing phrases such as “Out of sight, out of mind, huh?” Eventually, the crowd grew rowdy, yelling and cursing at the police. It was unclear if some would be arrested. Tensions were high.

That night, as she often did, my mother accompanied me, yet neither of us participated in serving. We kept moving closer to the action – a chance to witness civil disobedience firsthand.

As someone unfamiliar with such real-life scenarios, I grappled with the fear of potential consequences like arrest or citations. Would “inciting a riot” look bad on my college applications?

My mother is a full-time ophthalmologist, and I have aspirations of graduating high school without a rap sheet, so the thought of risking everything in the name of selfless service suddenly had me worried about myself, not others – and I became increasingly angry that aiding homeless people would lead to legal repercussions.

The Charitable Feeding Ordinance is unjustified. While I am willing to stand up for my beliefs, it was disheartening that external constraints limited my ability to contribute fully.

The police officers now know me on sight. They are usually friendly to all the volunteers and do not interrupt the meal service in any way. Their presence is more or less routine at this point. Like clockwork, as soon as we finish serving, they issue one citation, twice a week, for one of the volunteers to appear in court. As a minor, they have ignored me.

HPD has issued over 60 tickets to volunteers since February for violating the city’s Charitable Feeding Ordinance—and municipal court judges have ruled only one not guilty thus far. They have dismissed four, but these were immediately refiled by the City of Houston. The rest are still being tried.

Mayor Turner’s term is finishing this year. At a mayoral candidate forum in August hosted by Healthcare for the Homeless, eight candidates voiced their opinions and ideas to help tackle homelessness. State Sen. John Whitmire claims he would call a meeting with the owner of major sports teams such as the Rockets and Astros to make sure they’re helping address homelessness. U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee declared she would ensure that Houston was able to get the maximum possible federal funds to fight homelessness.

On October 23, early voting will begin, and by November 7, voting will close. Soon after, the new mayor will be inaugurated and serve for up to eight years. Do your research – consider the mayors that care about important issues such as homelessness and food insecurity. And remember that voting has consequences.



Dalia Sandberg