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Returning to ‘normalcy’ in Washington means little to Californians who are suffering

By Joe Garofoli, January 31, 2021

How many times have we heard in the last week that Joe Biden’s presidency is “a return to normalcy”?

The term generally refers to Washington, D.C., normalcy — the theater of politics that has little effect on most people. Many Californians are still dealing with the old normalcy — the one where unemployment is high, schools are closed and many businesses are struggling to survive.

“To me, that is viewed through the lens of someone of privilege,” said John Jones III, a community activist in East Oakland. “It is a privilege to be able to assert that a presidential election is going to change your life.

“For decades, it hasn’t mattered to many people in my community who is in the White House. We’ve been suffering,” said Jones, community engagement director at Just Cities, an Oakland social justice organization. “Ask someone who is unemployed or homeless or suffering whether they have returned to normal.”

The dozens of people who were in line outside the food pantry at Shiloh Church in East Oakland one day last week have different ideas about what normalcy looks like.

They don’t care that Biden’s press secretary is holding daily briefings, unlike her predecessor, or that



Valeria Fornes (left), a volunteer with the Robert Allen Mercy House food pantry, prepares a food bundle for Gema Santos at the donations container in the parking lot of Shiloh Church in East Oakland. *Photos by Jessica Christian / The Chronicle*

the new president doesn’t spend his days watching cable news and insult-tweeting like the old one. They’re not wondering how Chuck Schumer and Mitch McConnell will reach agreement on Senate rules or whether Democrats will kill the filibuster.

The people waiting in a drizzle outside Shiloh for a 25-pound box of food had more immediate concerns. Every week, Shiloh helps 425 families with food from the Alameda County Community Food Bank (where I have volunteered,

and which provides food to a different pantry where I regularly help out). Before the coronavirus pandemic, Shiloh fed roughly 200 families a week. Nearly one in every four residents of the county is facing food insecurity, up from one in five before the pandemic, according to the food bank.

Many are like Gloria Tome, who hasn’t worked since she lost her \$17-an-hour cafeteria job at UC Berkeley in March as the pandemic struck and much of the economy shut down. College students can

stay at home and take classes online, but Tome couldn't do her job from home.

Her husband is a roofer who has been out of work for months. Three of her four adult children are living at home; none has worked since the pandemic began. For much of the past year, Tome, 52, has had to line up at pantries around the East Bay to feed her family.

Yet like many people in line, she holds out hope that life will improve. Soon.

"Maybe," Tome said, "in three or four months they will open the university. I will wait."

A few feet away stands Victorina Calmo. All six members of her family had COVID-19 four months ago, but have since recovered. She's 50 and hasn't worked since she lost her job at a cookie factory nearly a year ago. Neither has her husband, a house painter. Two of her adult daughters are working just one or two days a week.

She isn't thinking about a return to normalcy. Instead, another emotion nags at her.

"Preocupada," she said in Spanish. She's worried.

Calmo has been coming to Shiloh since March. The chicken and ground beef and vegetables in the box that the pantry hands out is "good food," she said, better and more plentiful than what she could afford in a store.

She doesn't think her life will return to normal right away just because someone different is sitting behind the Resolute desk. But eventually, she believes, it will.

"Everything takes time to come back to normal," Calmo said.

Normal to Calmo means having a full-time job. Not having to wear a

mask. Being free to go where she pleases and to see her extended family and friends.

"To not be scared anymore," she said.

Across the state, other Californians are struggling with problems that extend beyond partisan politics.

At his home in the Central Valley, Benedicto Cazares wrestles with daily fears that have little to do with Washington. Cazares hasn't been able to drink the water out of the tap of his Tulare County home in more than a decade, through Republican and Democratic presidencies.

His normalcy: The 69-year-old retired farm worker is one of the more than 1 million Californians who don't have regular access to safe drinking water.

Once every two weeks, a local water company delivers five 5-gallon containers of water to his home in East Orosi, an unincorporated community of about 700 residents, most of whom are low-income Latino farm workers.

That's not enough water during the hot Central Valley summers for him and the five people he lives with — his wife, their daughter and her three children.

"It doesn't last. It's not enough," Cazares said in Spanish through a translator. "I always have to buy three or four more."

He's supported Republicans and Democrats in the past, but didn't vote in November. Local politics matter more in his life. He said he's tried everything over the past few years to get a reliable source of water, a basic necessity that most Californians take for granted.

"We fought. We've collaborated. We've gone to meetings and (public officials) say they're going to help,"

Cazares said. "We've been doing this for 14 years."

East Bay community organizer Leo Mercer is also looking more to local government for help than to Washington.

For many California communities of color, Mercer said, no matter who is the president, "we've got the same issues. Whether it's Biden or Trump or Obama" as president.

He is looking at the effects of mass incarceration and how the pandemic has disproportionately affected Black and Latino communities and how police treat communities of color. Nationally, low-income Black people are projected to lose 35% of their earnings compared to 2018 because of the pandemic, reversing their economic gains from the last decade, according to a study from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities think tank.

The current unemployment rate among Black Californians is 12.2%. It's 11.7% for Latinos and 9.9% for white people.

So the daily "normal" in his hometown of Oakland won't change unless big, structural reforms come out of the nation's capital, says Mercer, a rapper who incorporates music into his activism. Washington normalcy won't cut it.

"President Biden might look like someone who is great," said Mercer, 29. "But we know that the work is done within the community. Unless they co-sign with people who are at the bottom of the ladder, it's not going to make much of a difference."

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