

At The Salvation Army Harbor Light, one man discovers ‘recovery could be beautiful’

The Harbor Light is part of The Way Out, The Salvation Army’s initiative to impact homelessness in San Francisco.

“I didn’t think I’d ever reach the point where I was sick and tired of being sick and tired, but I did,” said Chris Solis, who at 42 had spent most of his adult life in jail before finding his way to The [Salvation Army Harbor Light](#) program in San Francisco.

Solis grew up in San Jose, California, with his parents and sister. Although he said he grew up with “nice values,” by age 14 he was drinking and using marijuana every day. He stayed in school, though, and held part-time jobs.

At 18, he applied to be a fish and game ranger, his dream job—he loved the outdoors. Meanwhile, he continued to experiment with drugs and discovered methamphetamine.

“I learned how much power drugs had, and I never had no power in life,” he said. “So now I learned, wow, drugs are powerful. And the meth made me feel free.”

When the police pulled him over at 19 for reckless driving, they found a gun in his car.

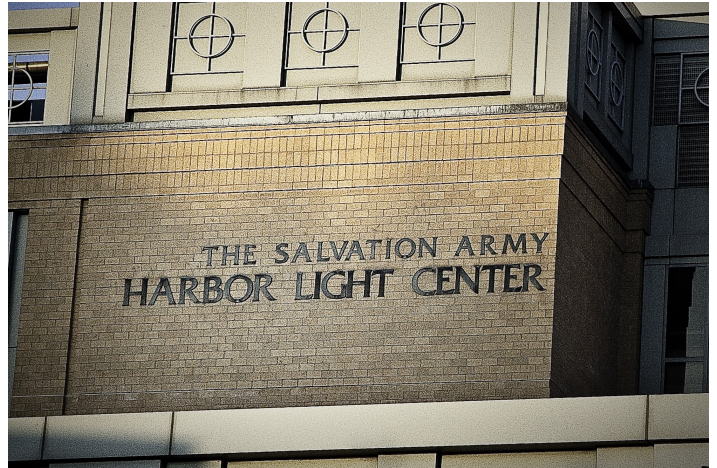
“Recovery is a lifelong process but for me, failure is not an option.”

Chris Solis

“From there, it never stopped,” Solis said. “I couldn’t get the ranger job now, so my dreams were crushed. I thought, well, there’s no going back. I’ve got a felony now, my life is ruined. The drugs are making me feel better, so let me just go this way.”

He said he continued to use and sell drugs, including heroin and fentanyl. And he continued to get caught.

“I did a lot of prison time—I kept on going back and forth,” he said. “Every time I got out, I would give myself a chance.”



Somehow, he said, he would manage to get a job, a place to live and a car.

“I’m great with people,” Solis said. “I love people. I have a great heart. And when I’m sober, I have a heart of gold. I have my mind clear, and I want to do amazing things.”

But the cycle continued and in March 2022, after a dramatic high-speed car chase, he surrendered to police.

“I gave up to them,” he said. “And I promised myself that day that I’m not going to use drugs again. No more.”

Facing a life sentence, he said he did what he could to prove he had changed. He took classes and attended Bible studies. At his court appearance, the judge agreed he could enter a recovery program.

He didn’t take to the first program he entered but when he asked around on the streets, he heard about “The Sally”—The Salvation Army’s [Harbor Light program](#).

Harbor Light is a clinical program for men and women, licensed by the state of California as a dual diagnosis facility. Major Tammy Larson, Harbor Light Center Administrator, said many Harbor Light participants take prescription medications and/or participate in medically assisted treatment for addiction.



Chris Solis. Courtesy Tammy Larson.

As a licensed facility subject to state mandates, The Harbor Light's spiritual activities cannot be mandatory but Larson said they can teach the 12 steps, each of which includes a biblical principle. And if they wish, participants can attend church at The Salvation Army Lighthouse Corps.

During the day, Harbor Light participants take classes, including those focusing on relapse prevention and life skills. Larson said during state inspections, the center must show residents have completed 20 hours of class time weekly.

She explained Harbor Light's three components: Recovery Wellness, the detox program, is where everyone starts. From there, participants move to a six-month residential program. After that, they can qualify for The Salvation Army's transitional living program at the [Joseph McFee Center](#). These are all key components of [The Way Out](#), The Salvation Army's recovery-focused homelessness initiative in San Francisco.

"Administering a clinical abstinence-based spiritual drug and alcohol recovery program has been very challenging," Larson said. "However, God's sustaining grace is evident. Chris' story is just an example of hundreds of lives that are and have experienced change at Harbor Light. God's power is redeeming their past, transforming their present, and giving hope for their future."

The Harbor Light program is working for Solis. He said he was part of a community when he did drugs, but now at Harbor Light, he's part of a better community.

"Recovery is a lifelong process but for me, failure is not an option," Solis said. He envisions success in his future including college and a career in counseling.

"I want to help kids, people at risk," he said. "I think with my story and what I've been through, I could help kids before they mess up."

And maybe, he said, he could someday work at Harbor Light.

"It just starts with small steps and those small steps turn into big steps," he said. "Will they be hard? Of course, they will. Do I feel I have it? No, God's got it... This Salvation Army program is the absolute best place to get better. This place right here is beautiful, and we see it every day. I never knew recovery could be so beautiful."

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