



CATHOLIC RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS





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A feature series of the National Catholic Reporter

Made possible by a grant from the
Conrad N Hilton Foundation

DEAR FRIENDS,

In February 2023, the National Catholic Reporter gratefully received a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The grant was awarded in support of our feature series, “Catholic Responses to Homelessness.” The project resulted in 15 articles, the first of which we published on April 4, 2023; we published the final piece in March 2024. This e-book is a compilation of the articles that appeared in the series.

According to a December 2023 press release from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, more than 650,000 people were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2023, representing a 12% increase from 2022. The reasons for this are complex, even daunting, perhaps. This series shines a light on Catholics who work daily to connect with people contending with homelessness and address some of those reasons.

Our project leader, NCR news editor Joshua McElwee, did a masterful job of engaging in-house and freelance journalists with expertise in the topic of homelessness. Each piece is well done, and collectively the stories create a well-rounded series that examines the issue from several vantage points.

I am inspired by the ministries and programs developed by the people in the field, and I am amazed by those who created them. The stories you will read show faith in action and faith inspiring creativity to address the unique challenges faced by people without homes and places to belong.

I hope you are inspired by what you read, and I hope that what you read inspires ideas to help address homelessness in your area. None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something.

In hope,



Joe Ferullo

Publisher/CEO, *National Catholic Reporter*

VIEW THE FULL SERIES HERE:
ncronline.org/homelessness-series

DEAR READERS,

In his autobiography, “Be My Guest,” our founder Conrad N. Hilton encourages readers to “Look up to people when you can – down to no one.”

Conrad Hilton was a devout Catholic who maintained a deep respect and admiration for Catholic sisters, and in his Last Will and Testament, he asked that the foundation bearing his name to “Give aid to the Sisters...who devote their love and life’s work for the good of humankind.”

Through our Catholic Sisters initiative, we affirm the tenets of Catholic Social Thought and our grants to support Catholic sisters, in particular, demonstrate our commitment to solidarity, subsidiarity, and a preferential option for people in marginalized communities, including individuals experiencing homelessness.

And, for more than 30 years, through our Homelessness initiative, the Hilton Foundation works with community advocates, nonprofits, city, county, state, other foundations and the private sector to identify solutions to homelessness.

We know that the needs of people experiencing homelessness are complex, and require interventions at both the human and systems levels. This series of compelling stories penned by the exceptional journalists at the National Catholic Reporter shows us how Catholics in different cities across the country are contributing in myriad ways, working with different resources, all towards our shared goal to connect our unhoused neighbors to the safety and dignity of a permanent home.

We hope that this series will encourage even more Catholics to become engaged in efforts to solve homelessness across the United States. I know Conrad Hilton would be proud to see so many Catholics embodying his belief that we must “love one another, for that is the whole law.”



Peter Laugharn

President and CEO

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

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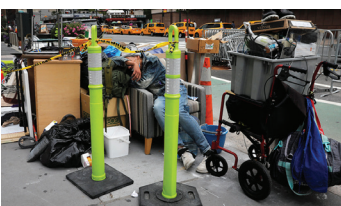
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The walk-through setup of this mobile food pantry in Addison, New York, allows participants to select their own items, which aligns with the Food Bank of the Southern Tier's mission of encouraging personal choice in item selection. (Courtesy of Food Bank of the Southern Tier)

HOW THREE CATHOLIC FOOD BANKS ARE MOVING AHEAD AS PANDEMIC ERA ENDS



by

CATHERINE M. ODELL

feedingamerica.org

foodbankst.org

ccthin.org

no-hunger.org

April 4, 2023

STORY

Food banks across the country are understandably wondering what the year 2023 will bring after the recent difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, historic inflation, and unresolved supply chain problems. Add on that millions of volunteers who helped out at food banks before the pandemic have been slow to return.

Directors of three food banks connected to Catholic dioceses recently shared with NCR about those challenges and the food banks they oversee. All three — Food Bank of the Southern Tier in New York state, Terre Haute Catholic Charities Foodbank in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Second Harvest Food Bank in Louisiana — belong to the Feeding America network of some 200 food banks.

Feeding America is the largest American nonprofit working to end hunger, and it annually distributes food to 46 million people. Food moves through member food banks to their associated food pantries, soup kitchens, school lunch and senior meal programs, nutrition education and homeless shelters.

Natalie Jayroe, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank in Louisiana, said the last

“COVID really helped people to understand how important and central food banks were to a significant number of people in every community. We are here to show how a community cares for itself. But we all also have a sense of urgency and know that we’re not doing enough.”

– *Natalie Jayroe*



Natalie Jayroe
(Courtesy of Second Harvest)

several years have been tough. But Jayroe, who became Second Harvest’s director in 2006 soon after Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, said a unique community spirit in Louisiana has made her job easier.

“This spirit was in place before Katrina, and the Catholic culture here is a huge part of it,” she said. “In Louisiana, everybody understands how important food is. It goes beyond nourishing bodies and

getting proper nutrition. It’s the thing that brings the family and community together.”

Jayroe said she loves that Louisiana food producers regularly donate truckloads of food that Louisianans just love – such as fish, oysters, rice, and okra.

On the other hand, she is also moved by humble, simple gifts. In recent years, she said she has regularly received an envelope in the mail with two one-dollar bills inside, but no return address.

“That person didn’t want to be thanked or recognized but was giving what he or she could afford,” said Jayroe.

Strong community support is especially essential for Second Harvest, a ministry of the New Orleans Archdiocese. It is one of the largest food banks in the country, tasked with serving hungry people in 23 Louisiana parishes or counties. One in five Louisiana households is at risk of hunger. With warehouses in New Orleans and Lafayette, Second Harvest distributes more than 39 million pounds of food and groceries a year.

“Unfortunately,” Jayroe said, “we’re statistically at the bottom with states like Mississippi when it comes to issues like chronic poverty. We have one of the highest rates of senior food insecurity and one of the highest rates of child food insecurity.”

2 Jayroe said Second Harvest began in New

Orleans in 1982 under the leadership of Archbishop Philip Hannan, a close friend of the Kennedy family and a World War II veteran. But Hannan also reached out to other religious leaders in the city. He wanted Second Harvest to be an ecumenical ministry. Within a year, Second Harvest was distributing food to faith-based organizations and nonprofits.

Natasha Thompson, CEO of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier in New York, said that the bank she directs also opened in the early 1980s. The resulting food bank was – and still is – a Catholic Charities outreach of the Rochester Diocese.

Thompson said that the six New York counties that the food bank serves are in a region that’s become economically challenged.

“There used to be a lot of manufacturing here but that all went away.”

In New York’s southern tier, there’s plenty of food insecurity and hunger among the half-million people her bank serves, she said. In 2022, according to Thompson, “we had 1.3 million requests for food and we distributed 13.5 million pounds of food through our partner agencies.”

Thompson, a Rhode Island native, has made a career of working for food banks. She’s especially inspired by the fact that many have Catholic roots. In fact, even the food bank concept came from an eccentric but devoted Catholic layman who’d moved to Phoenix in the 1960s. The “father of food banks,” she said, was John van Hengel. A man who needed to keep busy, he joined St. Mary’s Church there and began helping in the soup kitchen.

It was a chance encounter in 1967 with a destitute mother of 10 children that inspired van Hengel to invent a new way to address hunger. This mother told van Hengel how she regularly retrieved good but



Natasha Thompson
(Courtesy of Food Bank of the Southern Tier)



Volunteers sort dry bulk items at the Food Bank of the Southern Tier's MLK Day of Service event. More than 160 volunteers participated in the event on Jan. 16 this year. (Courtesy of Food Bank of the Southern Tier)

discarded food from refuse bins behind grocery stores. She scavenged enough good food to keep her kids healthy. What was needed, she thought, was a place to deposit food and withdraw it when needed. A food bank!

Van Hengel agreed. Good food was discarded or wasted while people went hungry. With the support of his parish, he soon launched the first food bank, St. Mary's Food Bank. Deeply committed to the concept, he later launched a nonsectarian nationwide network of food banks — known today as Feeding America. And he traveled around the world, promoting food banks.

Today, said Thompson, Feeding America is critical to her own food bank and others around the country. Only a small number are specifically Catholic like hers. Among them is the Food Bank of New Hampshire, the only food bank in that state. It's sponsored by Catholic Charities there. Many more food banks in Feeding America's network were or still are ecumenical projects.

"Feeding America establishes the guidelines under which we operate," Thompson said.

"They act as a national clearinghouse for food that's donated by manufacturers, retailers, farmers," she continued. "If you're Kraft Foods and you have eight truckloads of cheese incorrectly labeled as low fat, you have two choices. You can throw it out or you can donate it to Feeding America and its 200 food banks."

In New Orleans, Jayroe agrees. "Feeding America," she said, "helps us navigate relationships with corporations regionally so that we can get food from them. In south Louisiana, the 42 Walmarts give our food bank alone more than 10 million pounds of food a year. Primarily, it's perishable healthy, meat, dairy and produce. That's what we want. Hunger is as much about nutrition. Not every pound of food is equal."

Thompson said Feeding America operates by offering twice daily auctions of available food.

"It's a sort of eBay for food banks," she said. Banks bid on food they want and must pay for shipping. Smaller food banks, like hers, team up with others to bid on what they need. It might be a truckload of oranges from



John Etling (Courtesy of Terre Haute Catholic Charities Foodbank)

Arizona.

Feeding America, she adds, also acts as a clearinghouse for grants.

John Etling, CEO of Terre Haute Catholic Charities Foodbank in west central Indiana, couldn't agree more about the importance of Feeding America. Now in its 40th year, the Terre Haute bank serves seven Indiana counties and is an outreach of the

Indianapolis Archdiocese. Etling has been the director for 18 years but grew up there watching his dad in a similar role.

"This food bank organization started with my father who was not then a Catholic," Etling said. "Dad came from humble beginnings, got a football scholarship to Indiana State University and became a teacher. In schools, he saw poverty in our communities on a granular level. Typically, 90% of the student population participated in the free school lunch program."

According to the food bank's website, one in six people and one in four children living in west central Indiana are facing hunger today.

Etling's father befriended local Catholic priests, and food outreach in Terre Haute began through a shelter program. "It operated on a shoestring budget," John said.

In those days before cellphones, his dad kept a phone with the shelter's number on his nightstand. "If someone needed help in the middle of the night, he'd respond."

Almost 50 years later, according to Etling, distributing food is now far more complex. He said that modern technology is needed for food banks to be predictive and intentional in meeting needs. "We move out about 4 to 5 million pounds of food a year," he said.

In March 2020 as the pandemic began, Etling announced on local TV stations that mobile pantry trucks with boxes of food were heading out to 12 remote rural locations shut down by COVID-19. That mobile pantry program continued for a year.

These days, Etling said that he's often deeply moved by Google Voice phone messages left by people helped through the food bank. "We don't ask them to leave their names but to tell us how the ability to get food impacted them that day. The messages are in their own voices and they are so powerful."

Like other food bank executives, however, Etling also occasionally hears from local critics. They complain that people receiving food bank help must not be working hard enough. Or that they're lazy.

"I think Matthew 25 is a very good response," Etling said. "Catholic social teaching reminds us that we're called to help people when they need it. We're not here to judge or interrogate them. We do try to put in some guardrails, but if somebody takes advantage of us, that's on them."


Like Etling, Thompson gets local pushback from time to time. She hears it most when the Bank of the Southern Tier advocates for public policies that could help hungry people. Feeding people and advocating for them are both social justice works, she said. "We're supporting people who aren't making enough money. Why shouldn't people earn enough to pay their bills when they're working full time?"

Thompson said she has a poster in her office with a quote from liberation theologian Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Brazil: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Jayroe, speaking perhaps for food bank directors around the country, suspects that the last several years — though painfully difficult — have sometimes been a blessing in disguise.

"COVID really helped people to understand how important and central food banks were to a significant number of people in every community," she said. "We are here to show how a community cares for itself. But we all also have a sense of urgency and know that we're not doing enough."

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



A half-barefooted homeless man walks up the steps April 14, 2022, in Los Angeles. (AP photo/Jae C. Hong)

WHAT A GROUNDBREAKING DOCTOR LEARNED AT THE FEET OF HIS HOMELESS PATIENTS



by

BILL MITCHELL

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May 15, 2023

▶ STORY

I was drawn to Tracy Kidder's latest book, an investigation of homelessness, with three questions in mind:

- What's it like to be homeless?
- What can those of us with homes do to help?
- What can we learn from Dr. Jim O'Connell, the Boston physician who has devoted his life to caring for people on the streets? (The book held particular interest since O'Connell and I went to college together and we've remained friends since.)

Kidder has found a technique that works: Explore a complex topic that's baffling to most readers through the eyes of a main character the audience can relate to. Among his most notable works in this genre is *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, his 2003 book about the late Dr. Paul Farmer and his work in global public health.

In *Rough Sleepers: Dr. Jim O'Connell's Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People*, Kidder wastes no time addressing my first two concerns (the title is derived from the British term for people living without a roof over their heads). On the page

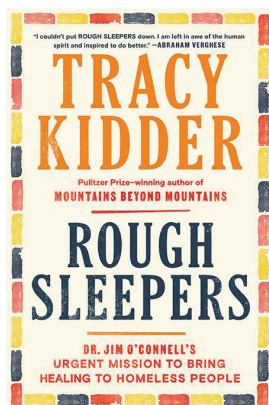
“I look at homelessness as a prism you can hold up to society and what you see refracted are the weaknesses in our educational system, our welfare system, our foster care system, God knows our corrections system, all the poverty and racial issues that need to be addressed.”

– Dr. Jim O’Connell

following the book’s dedication, he shares a poem written by U.S. Army veteran Michael Frada, who for many years was homeless and a patient of O’Connell. It is titled, “I Am,” and concludes:

So if we should meet for a moment on my life’s journey
Smile at me, talk to me, or simply be still
And know that I am.

Frada underlines an approach that O’Connell learned the hard way. Kidder recounts O’Connell’s first day on the job in 1985, a transition from a prestigious role as senior medical resident in the intensive care unit of Massachusetts General Hospital to showing up for work at a homeless shelter.



Cover art for the book *Rough Sleepers* (Courtesy of the publisher)

Learning to listen

After three years of residency and four years at Harvard Medical School, O’Connell was taken aback when a nurse informed him: “You’ve been trained all wrong.”

The nurse was Barbara McInnis, who was also a lay Franciscan.

“You have to let us retrain you,” she told O’Connell. “If you come in with your doctor

questions, you won’t learn anything. You have to learn to listen to these patients.”

And the best way for O’Connell to learn that, she insisted, was soaking the feet of the clinic’s homeless patients. For more than a month.

Kidder reports:

Foot soaking in a homeless shelter — the biblical connotations were obvious. But for Jim, what counted most were the practical lessons, the way this simple therapy reversed the usual order — placing the doctor at the feet of

the people he was trying to serve.

Nearly 40 years later, O’Connell and his colleagues have built an innovative model for homeless medicine. Among the services they provide is a 24/7 respite center for patients “too sick to return to the streets or a shelter but not sick enough for an acute hospital stay.” The center is called the Barbara McInnis House.

Among the cities O’Connell has worked with on the problem is Los Angeles, where an estimated 50,000 people are homeless; the number is about 6,000 on any given night in Boston. Another difference: Only about 5% of Boston’s homeless population stays on the streets and the rest are in shelters. He says the opposite is true in L.A., with 80-90% living on the streets and the remainder in shelters. Nationwide, the federal government put the homeless population at 582,462 in 2022, a slight increase over 2020.

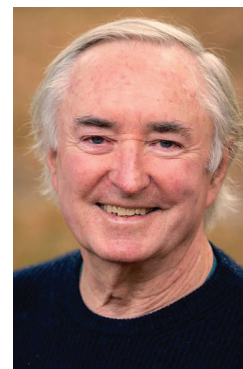
In L.A., O’Connell has become friends with Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries and pastor to L.A. gang members past and present. The two share a commitment to listening as Job One of their respective ministries.

Kidder first encountered O’Connell in 2014 when he tagged along on a van ride with the Street Team of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, or BHCHP, the organization O’Connell co-founded in 1985 and has worked for ever since.

Kidder and O’Connell make clear that the book is not a collaboration — it’s Kidder’s book — but they’ve appeared together in a number of settings to discuss it.

The story of ‘Tony’

Kidder didn’t spend all of his time following around O’Connell. A strength of the book is the time the author



Dr. Jim O’Connell (Courtesy of Jim O’Connell)

invested in getting to know people whose daily lives on the streets are almost unimaginable to the rest of us.

He focuses on someone he assigns the pseudonym “Tony,” and traces his story from a troubled childhood to his later life as a rough sleeper with a range of medical issues addressed by O’Connell and colleagues. In between was an 18-year prison term for “assault with intent to commit rape.”

At 6’4” and nearly 300 pounds, Tony was known in prison as “Big Man.” After his release, he served as a protector of more vulnerable men and women with whom he shared doorways and heating grates. Among the book’s poignant moments is Kidder’s account of Tony encountering O’Connell and his wife, Jill, and daughter, Gabriella, at Boston’s main train station. From his coat, Kidder reports, Tony “produced a gift-wrapped package, a brand new Cabbage Patch doll for Gabriella.”

Kidder adds:

Later, Tony told Jim, “A lot of people steal for their kids. I’m like, Come on, stop smoking your crack for a day and buy the kid something legit, don’t give the kid stolen stuff.” This by way of assuring Jim that the doll wasn’t stolen.

In describing a brutally abusive childhood, Tony initially disputed claims by his friends that the priest in their parish in Boston’s north end had abused them – and he said the priest never abused him. But he later told Kidder that he had been abused by the priest and provided his name, Alan E. Caparella. That prompted Kidder to do more research. BishopAccountability.org reports that a settlement (not brought by Tony) was reached against Caparella in 2013, after his death.

“I never told on him,” Tony told Kidder. “He raped me with candles and stuff.”

Tony also told him: “So between my family and everything else, OK, I knew back then when I was a little kid, there’s no such thing as God.”

O’Connell said he’d encountered some but not many cases of homeless people abused by priests, noting:

The number of homeless people who have suffered abuse – either sexual, physical or emotional – as

children is truly extraordinary. It’s way over 70 or 80 percent. I almost didn’t believe it at first. I wouldn’t say many [homeless people allege clergy sexual abuse], but one man in particular has a history of being arrested for destroying the doors of churches – his way of acting out what was pretty horrible abuse.

A winding path to med school

A 1970 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, O’Connell moved in several directions before deciding on medicine. After college, he earned a master’s degree in divinity from Cambridge University in the U.K., taught and coached at St. Louis School in Hawaii, briefly served as a teaching assistant to philosopher Hannah Arendt in Manhattan, managed a restaurant in Rhode Island and pooled resources with a friend to buy an old dairy barn in Vermont.

He said his decision to enter medical school at age 30 was prompted by the experience of sitting, helplessly, with the victim of a motorcycle accident until help arrived, not all that quickly.

“He was this tough, tough guy with a leg broken in half, which I couldn’t even look at,” O’Connell recalled.

Perhaps uncertain whether he would survive, the man shared with O’Connell intimate details of his life like his recent divorce and the sexual abuse he suffered as a child.

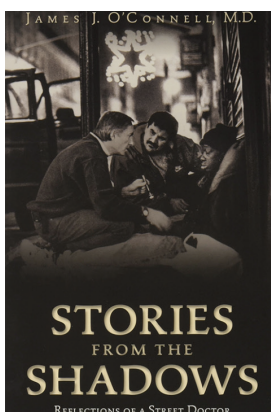
The encounter left O’Connell realizing how much he valued such conversations – but also how determined he was “to learn how to fix that leg.”

He also credits his upbringing: “I realized I was in search of something that I think probably comes from Notre Dame. It certainly comes from growing up in a parish in an Irish Catholic part of town where you wanted to do something that would make your life meaningful and be sure you’re giving back. I was really looking to be able to have some skill where I could give back.”

What people of faith can do

Given Catholic social teaching, statements by the U.S. bishops’ conference and what Pope Francis has said and done about homelessness, there’s good reason for Catholics to want to do something about it. In a recent interview, I asked O’Connell for examples of Catholic organizations that have been especially helpful – and what more they might do.

“It’s been remarkable, at least in Boston, how much Catholic and other religious organizations have done for the homeless problem,” he responded. He listed some local examples:



Cover art for Jim O’Connell’s book *Stories from the Shadows: Reflections of a Street Doctor* (Courtesy of the publisher)



Volunteers at the Paulist Center's Wednesday Night Supper Club on March 1 in Boston (NCR photo/Bill Mitchell)

The Franciscans at St. Anthony Shrine have basically opened their building to whatever might be needed. We cherish them. Their Lazarus program for people who die with no family and no friends provides a dignified service [and burial] for people who otherwise would have been left in a morgue or buried in a pauper's field. They also have a clinic at the shrine dedicated solely to homeless women.

St. Francis House, started by the late Fr. Louis Canino, has evolved from a bread line and a soup kitchen into Boston's largest day shelter. They have showers, they have meals and BHCHP has a clinic there that is as busy as you can imagine. Even though their funding has become quite secular, their spirit is still very much a social justice one.

O'Connell said a group of downtown churches had gotten together years ago and decided to provide meals on various nights "so homeless people had a safe place to go every night for a meal and a lot of accompaniment."

Among those dinners is the Wednesday Night Supper Club that the Paulist Center started more than 50 years ago. My wife and I are center members and before the pandemic were occasional Wednesday night volunteers. I returned a couple of weeks after reading *Rough Sleepers*, in part to get a more personal feel for the issues discussed in the book.

By 6 p.m., several dozen men and one woman had arrived at the center, which borders the 50 acres some of them call home — the oldest public park in the United States, the Boston Common, established in 1634.

After a dinner of chicken nuggets, beans and cornbread, several of the guests lingered to talk with the volunteers. One of the guests stroked his long white beard as he spoke with Anna Costello Duran, the center's young adult minister and someone he'd spoken with during a previous dinner at the center.

His eyes lit up when Costello Duran reminded him of their earlier conversation about the Muir Woods, the Bay Area park they had visited — decades apart — when each lived in California.

Another guest approached volunteer Margaret MacNeil as she was heading out the door, asking if he could have another cup of tea. MacNeil gladly obliged, telling me later: "We might have been the only person they've spoken with all day, at least the only person who spoke to them without a grimace or a scowl."

Systemic causes and solutions

Addressing the root causes of homelessness is more challenging than providing a decent meal at the end of the day, a blanket in the park or even a shelter bed for the night.

Kidder points out:

It was obvious that [O’Connell] and his colleagues weren’t addressing the many root causes of their patients’ misery. ... How do you treat physical illnesses in mentally ill patients and patients whose days and nights are ruled by the consumption of alcohol, the search for narcotics?

Asked what can be done, O’Connell told me:

I have struggled a lot with this. [As much as] we try to ease whatever suffering we can, to make their lives less onerous, to minimize suffering, the problem has become more complicated than any of us tend to realize. I look at homelessness as a prism you can hold up to society and what you see refracted are the weaknesses in our educational system, our welfare system, our foster care system, God knows our corrections system, all the poverty and racial issues that need to be addressed.

O’Connell credits Boston Cardinal Sean O’Malley with doing his best to be helpful on the homeless issue.

“Public opinion is very influenced by what the cardinal says,” O’Connell said. “He has expressed interest in homelessness and has got some pretty amazing people together to see what can be done. The archdiocese has land and rectories that could be converted into housing but that’s tricky because so many dioceses are under financial stress. So selling property becomes very important.”

The church in Boston has considerable property that could be rehabbed for homeless people, but the archdiocese has relied on property sales to help cover the tens of millions of dollars it has paid out in settlements to victims of clergy sexual abuse.

While affordable and subsidized housing has been considered an obvious solution to homelessness, O’Connell says experience shows it to be a necessary but insufficient step.

Fifty years ago, court rulings resulted in the release of tens of thousands of mental patients from institutions around the country. Without supportive services to help them adjust, many of them floundered and ended up on the streets. More recently, homeless people provided with housing are discovering the pitfalls of a similar lack of services as they struggle to

manage their newly sheltered lives.

O’Connell’s team worked with homeless people who have experienced the phenomenon in creating a video aimed at addressing it: “New Place, New Problems: Unanticipated Struggles with Being Newly Housed.”

What can church groups and individuals do?

“Befriending people newly in housing, inviting them to dinner, making sure they know where your parish is and that they feel welcome — all those things would be absolutely fabulous and very doable.”

What about panhandling — and extreme cold?

At one point, O’Connell got in trouble with the board of the organization he runs for occasionally handing out cash to rough sleepers — five or 10 or 20 dollar bills. When staff reported that patients insisted on seeing only him as a result, he agreed to stop the practice.

When I asked him for advice about how the rest of us might respond to panhandling, he recalled advice he got from the late Barbara McInnis, the nurse and lay Franciscan who introduced him to foot soaking:

I remember asking (her): “I come to the clinic and 45 people are asking me for money. What do I do?” Her take was: “You don’t have to give them money. You can if you want. But please look them in the eye and say, ‘No, I don’t have any money today. But how are you?’ Her point was that most people are just looking not to be invisible, which is how they feel most of the time.”

What to do when you encounter a homeless person, sometimes asleep or otherwise unconscious, who is exposed to the kind of extreme cold some of the country has experienced this winter?

I did a Q&A with O’Connell on the question back in 2014, when Boston was hit with an especially brutal cold snap. He acknowledged how little he learned in medical school about frostbite, hypothermia and a dreadful phenomenon known as “autoamputation.” He was clear about what to do: Don’t hesitate. Call 911.

Author’s note: In addition to *Rough Sleepers*, material for this article was drawn from a conversation with O’Connell last month and from his memoir, *Stories from the Shadows: Reflections of a Street Doctor*, published in 2015.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



The Sobrato Family Foundation bought this 68-unit apartment building in Santa Clara, California, called Vista Pointe Apartments, as part of a pilot project to test solutions for solving the housing crisis. (Courtesy of The Sobrato Organization)

SILICON VALLEY REAL ESTATE FIRM TESTS ONE PATH FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING



by

JIM PURCELL

July 14, 2023

STORY

The Sobrato Organization is a multigenerational, family-owned firm based in California's Silicon Valley. For more than 65 years, the Sobrato family has been developing commercial real estate for high-growth companies, building multifamily communities and investing in entrepreneurial enterprises.

The Sobrato family is now trying to help with one of the region's most enduring challenges: creating more affordable housing. In May, the Sobrato Family Foundation paid \$26.1 million for a 68-unit apartment building in Santa Clara, California. The purchase is part of a pilot project to test solutions for solving the housing crisis.

John Sobrato, the chairman of the organization, told NCR in a recent interview that he and his family hoped the purchase of the building will keep rents affordable for middle- and low-income individuals and families. "Our goal is to offer current and future residents safe and stable affordable housing," he said.

Following is the interview with Sobrato, edited for length and clarity.

“Our commitment to justice comes from the recognition that our success in large part was a function of what Warren Buffett would say: winning the genetic lottery: being very lucky as to when we were born, where we were born, and what color we were born and therefore having a moral obligation to right some of these structural inequities of the past that continue to this day.”

– John Sobrato

NCR: What led you and the Sobrato Organization to decide to tackle one of the most challenging problems of our time – affordable housing – especially here in the middle of Silicon Valley?

Sobrato: My two sons and their cousins have been really pressing my generation (the ones running the business) to think a little more holistically, which is not easy. The objective now is to add mission, where it makes sense to, in what we’re doing.

John Sobrato, board chair, The Sobrato Organization (Courtesy of The Sobrato Organization)

There are three components to what we’d like to do: preservation, production and policy.

I think we can actually make the most difference in preservation and policy. We certainly need to produce more housing, but it’s difficult because for 50 years there’s been a lack of political will to build enough housing to meet demand.

The cost to build housing in Silicon Valley today is \$750,000 to \$800,000 per unit. The only way to make that affordable is by buying the project down through grants and low-income housing tax credits. We have been a bridge for Catholic Charities as they layer up all their financing to build affordable housing, providing some grants to help get projects over the finish line. We can help a little bit there, but I didn’t see that as an area where we could make a big difference over what was already being done. Therefore, we have focused on preservation because nobody else is doing that.

We are executing this preservation strategy by purchasing what is known as “naturally occurring affordable housing” or NOAH. This refers to the tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of units that



John Sobrato, board chair, The Sobrato Organization (Courtesy of The Sobrato Organization)

were built in the ‘60s and in the ‘70s that are at affordable levels today.

We just bought our first one in Santa Clara called Vista Pointe Apartments. Because it was built in 1969, the current rents are relatively affordable. Although it is older, the bones are very good and the basic requirements of an apartment unit in the ‘60s are no different than what we build today.

When these types of units come on the market, they’re never marketed to just leave it as is and continue to keep the rents affordable. They’re

always marketed as a value-add opportunity and the value-add aspect comes from redoing the kitchens, the bathrooms and adding fancy gyms.

The buyers force the current residents to relocate as they shut the place down to make these extensive renovations. The upgrades then trigger rent increases that run 30 or 40% higher. The apartments go from the affordable level to or above the middle-income level. That’s what happens when you don’t build enough housing. There’s huge pressure to upgrade everything because there’s demand and if somebody can’t go buy a new unit because it doesn’t exist, they’ll go down a step. The whole thing trickles down to the bottom and those people that are in the affordable category of apartment communities get priced out because it gets upgraded.

Our goal is to offer current and future residents safe and stable affordable housing. If you operate the project voluntarily at 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI) or less, you can record a regulatory agreement that forces you to do it for some period of time and then once you have that regulatory agreement you just voluntarily agree to continue it. With the regulatory agreement we get a property tax exemption from

the county because it's affordable housing and it's required now to be affordable housing even though we entered into it voluntarily. We've now forced ourselves to do it.

We can keep the rents very flat and still cover expense increases and the median income of tenants should grow at least a few percent a year.

From a developer's perspective, what changes might you suggest in policies and/or regulations that would make affordable housing more possible without compromising unacceptable harms to people or the environment?

On the policy side we need to advocate for more low-income tax credits. Typically, low-income tax credits provide 60% of the funding of the project cost. That is significant because without it you can't make the project affordable. Another policy area would be less control at the municipal level so that the entitlement process is more streamlined for new housing construction.

The Sobrato Organization website declares: "The Sobrato Organization's mission is to build a more equitable and sustainable world through business and philanthropic leadership."

You also have a commitment to social justice mentioned on the Family Foundation website. What is it about the growth of the Sobrato family over time that led to this statement of mission and values?

We have been blessed with tremendous success and it is an absolute fallacy to think as some do, that it's just a matter of hard work and grit. It's just not true. Yes, that is one of the ingredients. However, in our family's case the wealth was built partly because my father is a white male who came into his career in 1960 and happened to live in Silicon Valley. Had he been born in Detroit, had he been born a person of color, had he been born a woman, we would not be in the position we are: end of story.

Our commitment to justice comes from the recognition that our success in large part was a function of what Warren Buffett would say: winning the genetic lottery: being very lucky as to when we were born, where we were born, and what color we were born and therefore having a moral obligation to right some of these structural inequities of the past that continue to this day.

Why is the capital gains tax lower than the ordinary income rate? Why is the tax on money earning money — where you're not really putting your daily sweat into the "work" — less than someone working a job, whether it's a doctor at a very high salary level

or whether it's somebody working at McDonald's? Why is there a home mortgage deduction that benefits homeowners? We have a tax system that is not progressive at all in that context.

***Editor's note:** Jim Purcell, a member of NCR's board of directors and a past chair of the group, is also a personal friend of the Sobrato family.*

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



The outside of the renovated Knights Inn in South Bend, Indiana, that now houses the Motels4Now project to offer immediate housing to persons experiencing homelessness (Bill Odell)

‘MOTELS4NOW’ PROJECT NEAR NOTRE DAME OFFERS HOUSING FOR SOUTH BEND HOMELESS PEOPLE



by
**CATHERINE M.
ODELL**

August 11, 2023

STORY

“Where’s your home? Where do you live?”

If asked in South Bend, Indiana, at least 115 people who were recently homeless would point to an unimpressive-looking single-story beige building called Motels4Now. The building is located on the bus line on the city’s west side, is within walking distance of a library branch, and is surrounded by fast food restaurants – McDonald’s, Taco Bell, and Domino’s Pizza.

In the summer of 2023, roughly 580,000 Americans would have to admit that they don’t have any home and are homeless, based on 2022 data. According to statistics from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the number of homeless people has been rising since 2017. Nationwide, the homeless population in the U.S typically includes many veterans, unaccompanied youth under the age of 25, and chronically homeless people with disabilities.

Until three years ago, Motels4Now was a Knights Inn Motel but was largely vacant and rundown. But, in 2020, it was renovated with CARES Act funds given

“I think one of the temptations of super abundance is that people begin to believe that they’ve earned what they have and that there’s no reason to share it. ... That’s just not true and it’s not what God desires.”

– *Sheila McCarthy*

through Indiana’s St. Joseph County. The money went to a coalition of people concerned about homelessness in the South Bend area who had a totally new plan and purpose for that motel.

When the pandemic began in 2020, many South Bend facilities serving the homeless had been forced to close. Like other U.S. cities, South Bend saw tent cities popping up without proper sanitation or access to clean water. When some tent city residents developed Covid-19, public health officials housed them in an empty Motel 6 on State Highway 933. These Covid patients needed rest and a safe space for quarantine.

The idea of housing homeless people in motels was suddenly a viable one in South Bend and – not surprisingly – in other cities. With travel and tourism shut down, motels were largely empty all over the country.

Long before the pandemic, South Bend had programs reaching out to support the homeless. The Center for the Homeless, Hope Rescue Mission and a variety of church groups had been working with or housing the homeless for decades. But, the approach to homelessness for Motels4Now was going to be – and is – different.

Motels4Now represents the “low barrier” or “housing first” approach to homelessness. National experts on homelessness maintain that it is ultimately more effective to provide housing first for homeless people. The other issues that homeless people typically deal with – addictions, mental or physical disabilities or illness – can be more successfully addressed later, after they are securely housed.

“It’s only from a place of stability that you can work on other issues,” Sheila McCarthy, the director of Motels4Now since it opened three years ago, told NCR.

McCarthy is also a former member of the local Catholic Worker community which opened Our Lady of the Road, a drop-in facility for the city’s homeless back in 2006. For years, local homeless folks were welcomed for hot breakfasts in the dining room on the weekends. Or, they came to use Our Lady of the Road’s

washers and dryers to do laundry for free. But, Our Lady of the Road didn’t have space to offer housing for the homeless.

Sheila McCarthy, director of Motels4Now and a member of the local Catholic Worker community in South Bend, Indiana (Bill Odell)

“We’ve had 615 guests here over three years,” said McCarthy about Motels4Now. She said some of those who made their temporary home at Motels4Now are now living elsewhere – with a secure roof over their heads.

“We’ve housed a lot of these people with Section 8 vouchers, and 140 have been housed permanently,” said McCarthy. “Some former residents at the motel are now moving on to better options of their own, and getting their own places.” It’s a myth, she said, to suggest that people are homeless by choice. Like everyone else, they long to have a door that they can lock, a safe place to put things, and a secure place to sleep.

Motels4Now offers guests a safe and secure shelter while its staff and local community medical, mental health and legal services try to guide them to more stable living situations and help them deal with addictions or illnesses. An average stay at Motels4Now in South Bend is about four months. But, the waiting list to get a Motels4Now room – that important but temporary home – never has less than 50 names on it, and it takes months for names to get to the top.

McCarthy, who earned a doctorate in theology at the nearby University of Notre Dame and previously taught at a state-run men’s correctional facility in Westville, Indiana, conceded that her present role as Motels4Now’s director is pretty challenging – every day. “Just about everyone we work with has a physical or mental disability,” she said. Some have dealt with – or are still grappling with – long-term addictions to drugs or alcohol.

Solar-powered security cameras now constantly monitor activity in and around the three buildings that constitute the motel complex. An around-the-clock



The outside of the renovated Knights Inn in South Bend, Indiana, that now houses the Motels4Now project to offer immediate housing to persons experiencing homelessness (Bill Odell)

support staff and security team help McCarthy oversee activity in and around Motels4Now.

Margaret (“Margie”) Pfeil, Motels4Now’s board president, is a theology professor at Notre Dame, and a member of the Catholic Worker community. She said that there are deeper reasons – social justice reasons – to find homes for the homeless. These reasons are embedded, she said, in Catholic social teaching and in the Gospel.

In Matthew 25, she said, Jesus challenges his followers to embrace the works of mercy. Community-wide efforts to house and care for the homeless, she said, are another expression of caring for the body of Christ.

Pfeil said it cannot become “normalized” that people are forced to sleep outside in harsh conditions.

“I think we’re being invited now by the Holy Spirit to live into a different way of being together, one that really prioritizes the lives and dignity of the most vulnerable people,” she said. “I think one of the temptations of super abundance is that people begin to believe that they’ve earned what they have and that there’s no reason to share it. ... That’s just not true and it’s not what God desires.”

Inevitably, Motels4Now, has had and continues to have its detractors.

McCarthy and other staff members work hard to stay in touch with people living in houses near the motel. Some business owners near the motel have complained about beer cans and trash littering their parking lots.

Additionally, the St. Joseph County Council recently blocked funding for Motels4Now, with several council members suggesting that people should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Nonetheless, Pfeil believes that many political and church leaders in the South Bend area are embracing the challenges of housing and caring for the homeless. The city has pledged \$4 million to help build the New Day Intake Center which will replace Motels4Now in several years. Local churches have also contributed funds and volunteers to help gather furniture for someone’s apartment or to help clean the parking lot and join residents for a meal.

One local Protestant church runs a weekly Bible study program for interested residents. Early in April, Bishop Kevin Rhoades, of the Fort Wayne-South Bend Catholic Diocese, led a prayer service to bless Motels4Now, its staff and residents.

McCarthy and Pfeil pointed also to national groups working on homelessness, such as Community Solutions, a nonprofit based in New York City. In 2021, Community Solutions was awarded a \$100 million MacArthur

Foundation grant to help end homelessness in 75 American cities within five years.

Lauren Barnes, the group's media strategist, said one goal is to address the country's acute shortage of affordable housing. Much of it is due to the gentrification of housing in many cities, including South Bend. Some of Community Solutions' success stories — in places such as Santa Fe, Brooklyn, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Aurora, Colorado — center on providing immediate safe housing for those in need.

Every homeless person also has a story, Pfeil pointed out, though the story can sometimes be heartbreaking. Many homeless people can be helped and can live healthier, safer, more stable lives. But, she said, there will always be some with special challenges and sad stories.

Pfeil mentioned an older woman named Madeline. Motels4Now has tried to offer help, but Madeline is unable to commit to staying in one place.

"It's gut-wrenching to see her on the street pushing a walker with all her things in it," said Pfeil. "She's well-known everywhere. She's a person we need to wrap our arms around but it's hard to do when she leaves so often."

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



Sheila McCarthy, director of Motels4Now and a member of the local Catholic Worker community in South Bend, Indiana (Bill Odell)



Margaret ("Margie") Pfeil, Motels4Now's board president and a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame (Bill Odell)



A tarp covers a portion of a homeless person's tent on a bridge overlooking the 101 Freeway Feb. 2 in Los Angeles. A study of homelessness in California released in June found that "a quarter (24%) of participants noted they could not find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability; 14% indicated that this impacted their ability to find housing a lot." (AP photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

EXPLORING THE UNIQUE STRUGGLES OF DISABLED HOMELESS PERSONS



by

**ALEJA HERTZLER-
MCCAIN**

driftwoodhousing.org

thekelsey.org

[fathermckennacenter.
org](http://fathermckennacenter.org)

August 22, 2023

STORY

Sandra Conley has been on the list for public housing in Mobile, Alabama, for four years, while coping without an accessible apartment. "There is so little affordable, accessible housing," she said.

Conley, a born-again Christian who was born with a leg length discrepancy and then became an amputee, is the director of community affairs for a newly established Mobile nonprofit working to create a micro house village for chronically homeless people, including those who are disabled.

Across the U.S., disabled people facing homelessness endure unique struggles because of a shortage of affordable, accessible housing, a lack of funding for housing assistance and seemingly unending bureaucratic mazes.

Conley said she became involved in the Driftwood Housing project while she was recovering in a nursing home from surgery. When staff tried to send her back to her wheelchair-inaccessible apartment before she could safely put weight on her foot, she used fierce self-advocacy to stay in the nursing home, and also was able to avoid

“Homelessness is not an individual failing. It’s a communal failing. Homelessness isn’t an individual choice, but it’s a policy choice.”

— Jesse Rabinowitz



Sandra Conley is the director of community affairs for a newly established Mobile nonprofit working to create a micro house village for chronically homeless people, including those who are disabled. (Courtesy of Sandra Conley)

losing her apartment while being sent to an accessible group home.

Conley plans to use those advocacy skills to support people experiencing homelessness, especially because she knows the struggles of finding affordable, accessible housing.

A landmark study of homelessness in California, which has a disproportionate percentage of the U.S. homeless population, released in June by the University of California, San Francisco, found that “a quarter (24%) of participants noted they could not find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability; 14% indicated that this impacted their ability to find housing a lot.”

Allie Cannington, senior manager of advocacy and organizing for The Kelsey, a California-

based organization that advocates for and develops accessible, affordable housing, said, “Our housing infrastructure has failed to create the commensurate supply of accessible housing that is needed for the growing population that is people with disabilities.”

Susan J. Popkin, a fellow at the Urban Institute and co-director of the institute’s Disability Equity Policy Initiative, agreed. “We have not built enough accessible housing at any income levels.”

Popkin compared the issue of the growing aging population of the U.S. to climate change. “It’s been obvious for decades that the baby boom was all going to get old,” and that “there would be a lot more people who needed help and needed accessible housing and needed community care,” she said.

Yet, Popkin said, “somehow we seem to be surprised by the fact that that has happened.”

Popkin and Cannington, who are both disabled, co-authored research that found that 18 million disabled people are not receiving federal housing assistance even though they are eligible based on low-income status.

“There has been a lack of support for federal housing assistance. It’s been underfunded for decades,” said Popkin.

Beyond housing stock and funding, bureaucratic hurdles can be a major challenge for disabled people experiencing homelessness.

Emily I. Brown, who has anxiety and depression in addition to other undiagnosed disabilities, lost her housing in September 2022. Navigating long lists of phone numbers and endless referrals as she searched for help in Missouri, then Denver, then Albuquerque, was overwhelming and too often fruitless.

When Brown spoke to NCR in early July, she was in a time-limited shelter hoping she could see the necessary people and find the necessary documents to get a housing voucher before time ran out.

In the meantime, navigating homelessness while disabled has been deeply uncomfortable. Brown said she has struggled in crowded, noisy shelters without privacy due to her sensory processing issues, and she sometimes becomes ill from not eating because she

can't access food she can eat.

Brown advises policymakers to streamline the process for connecting people with caseworkers and other resources.

Many homelessness service providers are using a housing first method, a cost-effective approach where people experiencing homelessness are provided housing before attempting to address any causes of homelessness, unlike programs requiring a person to participate in programming before receiving housing.

"After one year, 98% of folks in our permanent supportive housing program maintained stably housed, which really shows that housing ends homelessness," said Jesse Rabinowitz, senior manager of policy and advocacy at Miriam's Kitchen, a D.C. nonprofit devoted to ending chronic homelessness.

Catholic Charities of Baltimore utilizes a housing first approach and has five different programs providing permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless people with disabilities.

Some of the programs help families find their own housing that meets their needs, while others have shared and accessible housing operated by Catholic Charities with individual rooms for residents.

Rodney Lee, who has been with Catholic Charities of Baltimore for 26 years, said that Catholic Charities then provides services to help clients maintain that housing.

"Every client that comes into our services is given the opportunity to create their own trajectory of services and their plan and how they want that plan to look" while setting their own goals, Lee said.

These services can include occupational or physical therapy, or mental health or substance abuse care or support with employment, family or school.

In D.C., the city council has allocated local funding to supplement the limited federal funding for permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless people.

Adam Maier, director of housing partnerships at Pathways to Housing DC, which provides permanent housing to people with disabilities experiencing homelessness through a housing first model, said that the local funding makes D.C. "the model for what could be done across the country."

According to Maier, who was raised Catholic but now attends the nondenominational National Community Church, funding for housing remains in D.C. budget's because of community advocacy, including strong support from the faith community and Catholic churches.

Yet, even with this financial commitment to ending homelessness, an incredibly ineffective D.C. Housing



Emily I. Brown, who has anxiety and depression in addition to other undiagnosed disabilities, lost her housing in September 2022. (NCR screenshot)



Jesse Rabinowitz, senior manager of policy and advocacy at Miriam's Kitchen, a D.C. nonprofit devoted to ending chronic homelessness, said, "After one year, 98% of folks in our permanent supportive housing program maintained stably housed, which really shows that housing ends homelessness." (Courtesy of Jesse Rabinowitz)



Michael Broughton, the clinical coordinator at the Father McKenna Center, which supports men experiencing homelessness in Washington, has seen bureaucratic processes prevent the center's disabled guests from acquiring housing. (Courtesy of Michael Broughton)

Authority and a large number of unused housing vouchers illustrate pitfalls that funding alone has not solved.

Rabinowitz analyzed D.C. government data, showing only 32% of vouchers from fiscal year 2022 and none of the vouchers from fiscal year 2023 for permanent supportive housing have been used, even as many lack housing.

Michael Broughton, the clinical coordinator at the Father McKenna Center, which supports men experiencing homelessness in Washington, has seen bureaucratic processes prevent the center's disabled guests from acquiring housing.

Broughton said that one of the center's guests, who uses a wheelchair and has multiple disabilities, was connected with a housing opportunity six months ago but hasn't been able to move in because the process stalled after the inspection stage of the new housing.

After receiving a voucher for housing, another older guest who uses a wheelchair was told that his paperwork never arrived and that he would have to restart the process, said Broughton, who stayed on at the center after doing a year of service there with the Franciscan Mission Service.

At the national level, Cannington and The Kelsey are part of a coalition proposing the VITAL Act (Visitable Inclusive Tax credits for Accessible Living) as a housing supply solution. The act would require developers using the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit to create accessible housing for people with mobility and sensory disabilities and incentivize developers to create housing that is walkable or rollable to employment. The VITAL Act has been introduced in both chambers of Congress and has bipartisan support in the House.

Cannington also encouraged investments in home and community-based supportive services because, without them, disabled people can end up on the streets or in institutional settings.

Jarrett Smith, government relations advocate for Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, told NCR in an email that "NETWORK supports full funding of housing programs that aim to eliminate the challenges faced by people with disabilities when accessing housing."

Advocates for ending homelessness lamented the lack of public will to fund programs that end homelessness.

"Prioritizing anything over" meeting people's basic needs "is just alarming," said Broughton, quoting Matthew 25:40.

Broughton and Maier both spoke of the importance of forming relationships with people experiencing homelessness, especially because of their isolation. Broughton called this work a "ministry of presence."

Rabinowitz spoke of the need to change the prevailing narratives that "homelessness has always existed" and has no solution and that homelessness is a person's fault.

Brown highlighted that bad mental health and drug use are often caused by homelessness, not the other way around. "You can only be out here on the street fighting for survival, while much of society looks at you with apathy and disgust, before the sheer stress and despair of it all either breaks your brain, or makes you turn to some substance to numb that pain," she texted NCR.

Rabinowitz agreed that, while disability can lead to homelessness, homelessness often decimates a person's health and leads to disability.

"Ending chronic homelessness really is a matter of life and death," said Rabinowitz, underscoring those health consequences.

Popkin expressed concern about a punitive approach to homelessness gaining prominence. "We're going to incarcerate people, we're going to force them to accept treatment. That is the old way, and it's worrying to see that rhetoric coming back," she said.

"Homelessness is not an individual failing. It's a communal failing," said Rabinowitz. "Homelessness isn't an individual choice, but it's a policy choice."

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



Homeless men in 2019 are seen outside their tents under a bridge in Austin, Texas. People 65 and older are the fastest growing population of unhoused people in the U.S. (OSV News/CNS file, Bob Roller)

THE CRISIS OF UNHOUSED OLDER AMERICANS IS ACUTE. POLICY CAN BE THE ANSWER.



by
**DWAYNE DAVID
PAUL**

October 16, 2023

▶ STORY

Pope Francis is notoriously critical of what he calls a “culture of waste” or “throwaway culture” fostered under capitalist economies, characterized by indifference to human and ecological need in pursuit of consumption and profit. In a throwaway culture, one is only as good and worthy of care — as what one can produce. This problem, which impacts us all, does not spare our elders.

Older Americans are currently experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness at rates not seen in decades. That people 65 and older are the fastest growing population of unhoused people is the latest sign of the intensifying brutality of economic life in the United States.

Today’s economy is such that it forces older adults, especially the poorest and racial and ethnic minorities, to choose each month which of their fundamental needs they will meet, and which they will neglect. In the housing literature, “cost-burdened” and “severely cost-burdened” mean that households spend 30% and 50% of their income, respectively, on housing costs. Nearly a third of renters over 50 are severely

“The fact that we are seeing elderly homelessness is something that we have not seen since the Great Depression.”

— *Dennis Culhane*

housing cost burdened. The poorest spend half as much on food and out-of-pocket health care costs compared to their low-income peers who do not share the same housing cost burden.

For the American poor and working class, the United States is a worse place to grow old today than it was in years past. With so many living with such tight margins, they are an emergency away from experiencing homelessness. Predictably, the most common reasons why older people experience homelessness for the first time: the common, largely preventable cruelties of life for which there is little to no social insurance in the U.S.: rent increases, family dissolution, illness.

“The fact that we are seeing elderly homelessness is something that we have not seen since the Great Depression,” University of Pennsylvania social policy professor Dennis Culhane told the Wall Street Journal in a recent interview. Indeed, the transformation over the last 30 years has been remarkable. In her 2020 article for the journal *American Society on Aging*, Margaret Kushel notes that in the early 1990s, among homeless single adults, only 11% were age 50 or above. Today, half that population is 50 or older.

Importantly, these people are not solely the long-abandoned, chronically homeless. The study found that half the 50 and over homeless population first experienced homelessness at age 50 or older. Indeed, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) 2021 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, while the number of adult-only households with people age 55 to 64 decreased, this same demographic saw an increase in experiences of chronic homelessness, suggesting that people are simply aging out of homes and into shelters and the streets.

There’s another, more fundamental reason why the increase cannot be attributed to chronic homelessness: Homelessness is a death-dealing phenomena. Unhoused people simply die too young for chronic homelessness to be the cause of the escalating median age. The average life expectancy of a

homeless person is 17.5 years shorter than the general population’s — just over 56 for men and 52 for women. Premature death is among the ways we “solve” homelessness. The social dislocation, the stress, the stigmatization, the need to prioritize the most basic survival needs are daily catastrophes on the human body and mind.

It should not be this way. From the standpoint of Catholic social teaching, it is the role of the government to create a climate in which individuals can pursue both their rights and responsibilities. In 21st century America, when the cost of rent routinely outpaces the rate of inflation, that means significant political and economic changes to housing. When the majority of Americans cannot afford a \$1,000 life emergency, that climate simply does not exist here.

It does not have to be this way. There are achievable policy measures we can strive for and win now, regardless of party affiliation. We need a two-track mind when it comes to policy solutions. Our social safety net should be geared toward preventing the worst-case scenarios, but capable of humane reaction to catch those who, for whatever reason, slip through. Right now, with few exceptions, we barely do either. However, there are success stories. While imperfect, the effort to house military veterans has been a remarkable success in a relatively short period of time when a housing-first model was adopted during the Obama administration.

Housing-first models place a low barrier to entry for getting off the streets and out of shelters. It does not require, for instance, would-be participants to resolve substance abuse issues before they are admitted. Rather, housing is the foundation upon which other quality of life improvements are made, usually through supportive services offered by or in conjunction with the housing provider.

The Obama administration used a program that combined the human services and case management resources of the Department of Veterans Affairs with \$635 million worth of HUD housing vouchers between 2008 and 2016. There has been a 55.3% reduction in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness



Cots for the homeless are lined up in the Parish Life Center at St. Jude the Apostle Church in Lewes, Delaware, Nov. 11, 2022. Nearly a third of renters over age 50 are severely housing cost burdened, meaning their household spends 50% of their income on housing costs. (OSV News/The Dialog/Michael Short)

between 2010 and 2022.

It turns out that simply meeting needs is the solution to the problem of unmet needs.

Citizens should advocate for a similar housing-first approach that takes a holistic view to providing supports that seniors need: accessible design, transportation and community. There are no federal rent controls imposed on the private housing markets. In the context of a national housing shortage, property owners are empowered to raise rents as high as they please and as high as their local markets can bear. So it's not surprising that a July 2023 study of data from the St. Louis Fed found that since 1985, rent increases have outpaced the rate of inflation by 40%.

If rent had increased at the same rates, the average renter would pay 19% less per month.

Another policy solution is automatic enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly food stamps). Fewer than half of all SNAP-eligible people age 60 and older are enrolled in the program. Our policies should map onto basic shared human experience. It is common enough for our physical vulnerability to increase as we age for us to plan around that simple fact. We should not wait for people to experience and then demonstrate need in an application for us to supplement their food allowance. In a country that routinely wastes nearly 40% of its food, every empty stomach is a scandal.

The most fundamental problem, however, is that housing can never be treated as a human right as long

as it is largely market-based. Housing in the United States is almost entirely private: In 2019, only 11% of renting households, or 5 million households, obtained housing through a HUD program such as public housing, Section 8 or housing-choice vouchers. Even among that lot, the latter two programs consist of public funds being poured into the private market.

Markets, and the profit motive that moves them, cannot guarantee rights. Rights are political. The ideal aim of politics — namely, justice — is not always profitable. Only large-scale political transformation can change the precarious situation of our elders.

On Oct. 4, Pope Francis published a new document on the ecological crisis, *Laudate Deum*. In it, he gives us a good shorthand summary of what he means by “integral ecology,” by describing his two deep-seated convictions that, “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone.” This is more than just a picture of the environment and our place in it; it's also an account of our life together as human beings.

Perhaps, then, we might also add “No one is abandoned alone” to see its policy implications. The affordable housing crisis demonstrates that this framework contains just as much realpolitik as it does moral content: Most of us are at risk in any system that so easily throws away its most vulnerable members.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



A homeless person in New York City sleeps among belongings Aug. 31, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)

‘BEYOND HOMELESSNESS’ SHOWS THE PROBLEM IS MORE THAN HOUSING



by
MATT MITCHELL

November 14, 2023

STORY

Having grown up in a privileged suburb outside of Des Moines, I never really encountered homelessness until traveling while in my program of study in college, when I met an unhoused man named Michael on a pier in Mississippi. After conversing with Michael over a late night meal at Waffle House, I had an “aha moment”: Michael’s homelessness was revealing my own. His yearning for a place of acceptance and home called forth my desire to belong, no matter my faults, no matter my weaknesses, in a place I too could call home.

As authors Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh point out in their new book *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, homelessness has entered the main stage in many spheres of our society. The most public form we see is inadequate housing, which forces those affected to camp outside, couch surf or trade housing for substances.

But Bouma-Prediger and Walsh don’t stop there. *Beyond Homelessness* claims that homelessness “is a matter of ‘placelessness’ ” where one lacks a sense of connection,

“Houses become homes when they embody the stories of the people who have made these spaces into places of significance, meaning, and memory.”

— Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh

identity and love. This means homelessness could be experienced not just by the unhoused, but also by those who might have multiple houses, travel endlessly or are dislocated from their original place of home, such as refugees.

The authors illustrate this point through the cases of Kenny and Kenneth. Kenny is an unhoused male with deep connections to his unhoused peers as a family of sorts; Kenneth is a traveling executive who has multiple houses but never feels at home. If the problem of homelessness takes both these and other forms, how large is our homeless population, really? How large is the population without a place where they encounter love, affirmation and a sense of belonging? If this definition of homelessness is true, so is Mother Teresa’s critique of the West: “The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for.”

Beyond Homelessness explores the meaning of “home” and emphasizes God’s covenantal and homemaking love for humanity. The authors nod to Barbara Kingsolver’s theory that home is simply a place of belonging — and a place where we share that belonging with others. If we have been gifted a place of belonging, love and affirmation, isn’t it our responsibility to share that with others? Sadly, most of us are more homebreakers than homemakers. Our commitment to one another is so small compared to God’s commitment to us.

My dinner with Michael at a random Waffle House in Mississippi has transpired over the years into a vocation of living with and alongside people searching for a home in a Catholic Worker house of hospitality in central Iowa. Here, I am reminded daily by those who enter my home that I myself am welcomed into God’s home. “Man cannot ‘fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself,’ “ wrote Pope John Paul II (quoting *Gaudium Et Spes*). I have found that to be true.

Beyond Homelessness reflects what I have learned in my experience of homeless ministry: Providing housing is not the same as homemaking. The authors include the U2 lyric, “A house doesn’t make a home.”

From the origin of the United States welfare programs in the late 1930s, our society has assumed that the government has the resources to solve homelessness.

Quite the contrary.

It’s true that the government has the resources to house people — and, yes, housing is a fundamental human right and is necessary for the experience of home. But addiction remains addiction and loneliness remains loneliness, even when you are housed in your new single bedroom apartment. The house is a tool to achieve the experience of a home.

So how might we create spaces of home? “Houses become homes when they embody the stories of the people who have made these spaces into places of significance, meaning, and memory,” write Bouma-Prediger and Walsh. In my experience, I have lived alongside some but only *next to* others. The mere location of habitation does not designate it as a place of love. It is the “doing life together” that creates home. My experience of home from childhood through adulthood was not bound by a physical structure, but by time spent together.

One means of homemaking highlighted throughout the book is the sharing of meals, which is also the backbone of the Catholic Worker model of hospitality. Even those who have never been unhoused can attest to the importance of “breaking bread” together in our culture, in biblical history and in how we worship. Our homemaking God invites all to this feast to consume Christ in our bodies through the gift of the Eucharist. In the Catholic faith, the most intimate encounter we have with God is at the table. So it stands to reason that the most intimate encounter we can have with others is also at the table — where a house can become a home.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



People camp in tents next to the Interstate 405 freeway March 31 in Portland, Oregon. (AP photo/Eric Risberg)

AMID RECORD CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS, ADVOCATES AND EXPERTS SAY THERE IS A SOLUTION



by

**KATIE COLLINS
SCOTT**

stfrancisfriends.org

December 11, 2023

STORY

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series about chronic homelessness and permanent supportive housing. The second part will be published Dec. 12.

A refrigerator adorned with photographs and topped with a box of Honey Bunches of Oats. White doilies and a bouquet of artificial flowers arranged on a coffee table. A damp towel draped over the bathroom door. They are simple signs of a lived-in and thoughtfully decorated apartment, but for Sharon Browning they are also the trappings of a life rebuilt.

“When I was homeless, I would sleep on a bench with my purse, but everything got lost or stolen, even my clothes,” said the 64-year-old as she opened her vinyl blinds, letting in the fall Pacific Northwest sunlight.

“I was trying to stay in motels but I didn’t have an ID and I wasn’t on medication, so I didn’t know how to function,” she said. “I’d never been on the streets before and didn’t know how to defend myself.”

“...if you give people housing and services, starting with what they ask for, lots and lots of people will become stable and never be homeless again.”

— Steve Berg

Browning, who said she attempted to navigate her bipolar disorder with alcohol, eventually moved into housing that required sobriety.

“I couldn’t get myself straightened up, so I got kicked out,” she said.

Then Browning found an apartment complex managed by Catholic Charities of Oregon. It offered affordable housing coupled with supports to help individuals remain housed, and there was no sobriety mandate.

That was 17 years ago. Browning has lived there ever since and recently celebrated eight years in recovery.

As chronic homelessness escalates nationwide, advocates and researchers say a big part of the solution is the model that transformed Browning’s life. Known as permanent supportive housing, the approach incorporates rent-restricted housing with a range of voluntary support services.

Catholic agencies helped develop the model decades ago, and in 2020, Catholic Charities USA launched a pilot aiming to reduce chronic homelessness 20% over five years in five cities, including Portland, in part by increasing the stock of permanent supportive housing.

While the Catholic pilot has made headway, there are challenges that limit the supply of permanent supportive housing and the effectiveness of programs that exist. Staffing shortages, inadequate funds, long wait times, the so-called NIMBYs and pushback tied to critiques of the “housing first” concept are among the hurdles.

Yet even with poor implementation, “it is still better than other options,” said Marisa Zapata, director of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative and a professor of urban studies and planning at Portland



Sharon Browning sits in her Portland apartment this fall prior to attending a faith sharing group. After living on the streets and grappling with bipolar disorder and alcohol, Browning, now 64, found long-term stability in Catholic Charities-run permanent supportive housing. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)



Homeless people talk outside on a couch July 5, 2022, in Portland, Oregon. (CNS/Bob Roller)

State University. “Permanent supportive housing is the most evidenced-based solution to chronic homelessness that exists.”

Assisting the most vulnerable

Not far from Browning’s apartment building, a row of tarp-covered tents, parked rundown cars and other temporary shelters line a city block. Oregon has the highest rate of chronic homelessness in the United States, and nationally chronic homelessness rose almost 65% between 2016 and 2022, according to Department of Housing and Urban Development figures. The overall homeless population is disproportionately Black and Indigenous.

People classified as chronically homeless — usually those who’ve been without housing for at least a year and have a disabling condition, including addiction or mental illness — make up almost a third of the United States’ total homeless population and are among the most vulnerable.

“Chronic homelessness is about ongoing daily survival,” said Rose Bak, chief program officer at Catholic Charities of Oregon. “It’s figuring out over and over where to get the next meal and take a shower, and then there’s increasing violence against people on the street.”

In Portland, winter and fall are always rainy and cool, and that leads to things like trench foot and other infections, Bak said. “Add to that the addiction and mental health crisis or other disabilities and life gets exponentially worse.”

Early versions of permanent supportive housing emerged in the early 1980s as interventions for homeless individuals with mental illness, HIV/AIDS and chronic substance abuse. Over the



Franciscan Fr. Tom Walters, who helped found St. Francis Friends of the Poor in New York City, is pictured with tenants in the mid-1990s. (Courtesy of St. Francis Friends of the Poor)

years it’s also been used to address homelessness in other at-risk populations, such as youths aging out of foster care and people involved in the criminal justice system. It is now often implemented for the chronically homeless.

Though the concept “is sort of an obvious thing, no one had tried it before,” said Steve Berg, chief policy officer for the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

In November 1980, what is now St. Francis Friends of the Poor was opened in New York City by three Franciscan Friars who pioneered the idea of permanent supportive housing for homeless individuals with mental illness. According to a history compiled by the Supportive Housing Network of New York, between 1982 and 1986, Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens redeveloped church-owned properties for supportive housing, a strategy used in Catholic Charities USA’s current initiative.

Under the housing model, all or several units in



Good Shepherd Village, which opened Nov. 6 in the suburbs of Portland, has 142 units of affordable housing, including 58 units reserved for permanent supportive housing. With funding from a \$652.8 million housing bond passed by Portland area voters in 2018, Catholic Charities of Oregon staff will provide supported residents with a range of services and case management. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Oregon)

an affordable housing apartment complex are for supported tenants, and services are onsite. There is also a scattered site model, where tenants live in subsidized private market apartments and nonprofits provide mobile services. Residents use about a third of their income for rent.

“If your income is \$900 a month, you pay \$300; if it’s zero dollars, you pay zero dollars,” said Sally Erickson, director of supportive services for Catholic Charities of Oregon and an expert on permanent supportive housing.

Construction, operation and the services of supportive housing usually are financed through a mix of federal, state and local funds, grants or loans from private corporations and financial institutions, and philanthropy.

The federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit is one of the largest programs for creating new permanent supportive housing units, while rent is often

subsidized with HUD- or state-funded vouchers.

Tenants are offered case management, and services range from utility assistance and child care to job training and psychiatric and substance abuse treatment.

Once housed, many people need help overcoming the trauma of homelessness and to relearn life skills like how to understand a lease or work a thermostat, Bak said.



Sally Erickson is director of supportive services for Catholic Charities of Oregon. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Oregon)

“There also might be behaviors that made people feel safe on the street but don’t work well in housing,” she said. “Pushing someone who gets in your space might keep you protected while homeless but that could get you evicted in housing. We help people change those kinds of patterns.”

Successes and setbacks

Permanent supportive housing and housing first frequently are conflated, especially in recent debates about homelessness nationwide, because many, though not all, supportive housing programs operate under the philosophy.

Housing first does not require people to accept services like treatment for mental illness or drug use as a condition of housing. In the early 2000s, President George W. Bush embraced the idea, and it became part of the national policy to address homelessness.

“Housing first makes a lot of sense,” said Erickson. “You are not able to be compliant in mental health treatment or addiction treatment or managing your health while you are living through the danger and chaos of being outside.”

It took Browning several years of relapse and recovery before she was able to find long-term sobriety. “But I did it with a home and with support,” she said.

Permanent supportive housing, like housing first, long received bipartisan support, and both Bush and Barack Obama put money into generating more units. From 2007 to 2020, the stock of permanent supportive housing beds more than doubled.

The result, say advocates: Between 2007 and 2016, chronic homelessness declined by more than a third.

Funds for supportive housing remained static during the Trump administration, however, and in 2017, the number of chronically homeless individuals began to move upward again, a trend that’s continued through President Joe Biden’s administration, which has allocated more — though advocates say insufficient — funds. The 2022 count of chronically homeless individuals surpassed all previously recorded years.

The increase, say Berg and other advocates, is because the housing market caught up with advances made in programs for the homeless.

“You can’t really blame the increase on Trump,” Berg said. “I think we accomplished a lot by creating better systems for the homeless — and we can still accomplish more because the homelessness systems don’t have enough money to do what they need to do. For every 10 people who are moved into housing on a given day, 15 or 20 more people lose their housing.”

There are limitations to some of the research on permanent supportive housing and studies that show mediocre success. There are also examples of programs that are seriously deficient.

Pascale Leone is executive director of the Supportive Housing Network of New York, a membership organization representing more than 200 nonprofits that develop and operate supportive housing. (Courtesy of Supportive Housing Network of New York)

Pascale Leone, executive director of the Supportive Housing Network of New York, said studies or examples that show poor or lackluster outcomes reflect not a failure of the model but obstacles agencies face implementing it.

“There are real challenges that can reduce the efficacy of some permanent supportive housing,” she said. Still, “study after study” affirms that it “helps people get back on their feet and provides the best opportunity for them to find stability.”

A 2023 paper summarizing a decade of findings about a program in New York concluded placement into such housing was associated with «improved physical and mental health outcomes, increased housing stability, and statistically significant cost savings per person after one year of placement.»

Researchers at the University of California San Francisco found that 86% of the chronically homeless people placed in permanent supportive housing in Santa Clara County remained in their housing for the «vast majority» of the study follow-up period.

In Portland’s Multnomah County, a new report found 99% of people the county moved into permanent supportive housing between July 2021 and July 2022 remained housed a year later.

With permanent supportive housing you are “treating those who have the most problems, who have been on the streets the longest, who everybody thought you couldn’t help,” Berg said. “Then lo and behold, if you give people housing and services, starting with what they ask for, lots and lots of people will become stable and never be homeless again.”

Sharon Browning opens the front door to Kateri Park apartments in Southeast Portland. The affordable housing complex includes 20 units of permanent supportive housing. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)

Robert McCann is president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington. The Spokane-based nonprofit is participating in Catholic Charities USA’s initiative, and over the past two decades,



Pascale Leone is executive director of the Supportive Housing Network of New York, a membership organization representing more than 200 nonprofits that develop and operate supportive housing. (Courtesy of Supportive Housing Network of New York)



Sharon Browning opens the front door to Kateri Park apartments in Southeast Portland. The affordable housing complex includes 20 units of permanent supportive housing. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)

McCann has helped his agency dramatically increase its supply of supportive housing.

The housing first model of permanent supportive housing aligns well with Catholic social teaching, said McCann. “Every person is made in the image and likeness of God, he said. “We don’t care where you are from, what your background is, we are going to serve you and care for you.”

On a recent afternoon, Browning sat in Catholic Charities of Oregon’s drop-in center for homeless women and visited briefly with Victoria Waldrep, the longtime manager of homeless and transitional housing services.

Over the years Catholic Charities has “always been there,” said Browning. “If I have questions about a hospital bill, need assistance with bus fare, they help. If I needed some hot food, they would feed me. They also just say, ‘How are you doing today?’ They make you feel special.”

Waldrep leaned in toward Browning. “Well,” she said, “that’s because you are.”

Editor’s note: Part 2 of this series examines Catholic Charities USA’s initiative to address chronic homelessness and some of the challenges that hinder permanent supportive housing efforts nationwide.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



Bonnie McCoy is pictured in her permanent supportive housing unit in Southeast Portland on a recent afternoon. The 56-year-old, who has had four surgeries in two years, lost her housing after a divorce. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)

PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS NEED MORE FUNDING, SUPPORT, SAY ADVOCATES



by

**KATIE COLLINS
SCOTT**

December 12, 2023

STORY

Editor's note: This is the second in a two-part series on chronic homelessness and permanent supportive housing. The first part looks at the history and success of the housing model and is available here.

For years, Eve was a self-employed seamstress in Oregon, creating costumes for dancers, weightlifters and figure skaters and for the occasional Nativity reenactment. She rented a small house and made ends meet.

Then came the 2008 recession, the bank took over the house, “and they threw us out,” said Eve, who asked NCR not to use her full name. “The first night I hit the street for real, it was cold and I didn’t have a sleeping bag.”

She tried to piece together places to stay, including motels before they got too expensive. “I’d go to 24-hour restaurants and order coffee, sleep on a train or take a nap on the bus,” said Eve, now 72.

Homelessness and lack of dental insurance left her teeth in such bad shape

“Housing is a basic human right, and our country should be a place where every individual and family has somewhere safe to sleep at night and a place they can call home.”

— Kerry Alys Robinson

they all needed to be removed, and she had several bouts of pneumonia.

“I coughed up blood,” Eve recalled.

Between 2016 and 2022, chronic homelessness increased nearly 65% in the United States, with more people like Eve spending long stretches on the streets or in shelters. Advocates and homelessness experts say a critical part of the solution has existed for years, though it faces a number of challenges.

Permanent supportive housing, a combination of subsidized housing and support services, often onsite, is not just the most effective way to reduce chronic homelessness “but also the most cost-effective way in the long run,” said Pascale Leone, executive director of the Supportive Housing Network of New York.

Catholic Charities USA launched a pilot in 2020 that aims to reduce chronic homelessness in five cities over a five-year period by, among other strategies, securing permanent supportive housing for those who need it. The initiative includes partnering with local, primarily Catholic, health care providers.

“I know people who’ve said to homeless people, ‘Just get a job,’ “ said Eve. “But I know people working at McDonald’s who are sleeping in their cars. I know people working at gas stations who can’t get into housing.”

Some on the streets can’t give up a drug addiction, Eve added. “I also know there are a lot of people who don’t start off with a drug addiction but end up with it because they are in a hopeless situation.”

Mental illness and substance abuse disorder can impact an individual’s housing status, but Gregg Colburn, a professor at the University of Washington, and data scientist Clayton Page Aldern use statistical analysis of existing data to show in their 2022 book, *Homelessness is a Housing Problem*, that the homelessness crisis in cities cannot be attributed to disproportionate levels of drug use, mental illness or even poverty. Instead, it is driven by housing costs and availability. The Pew Charitable Trusts likewise reports that a large body of research shows homelessness is driven by housing costs.



Bonnie McCoy shows an old photo of her three boys in her apartment complex in Southeast Portland. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)

In recent years demand for housing rose while supply of new units plummeted, causing prices to skyrocket across the country. Meanwhile wages haven’t kept pace with housing cost increases.

The severe shortage of affordable housing in the United States “is a moral crisis in urgent need of solutions,” Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, told NCR. “Housing is a basic human right, and our country should be a place where every individual and family has somewhere safe to sleep at night and a place they can call home.”

The Healthy Housing Initiative

The goal of the Catholic Charities USA Healthy



Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA)

Housing Initiative — concluding at the end of next year but which organizers hope will be replicated — is to house a total of 698 chronically homeless individuals, reflecting a 20% decrease in each city based on 2019 numbers, and partner with local Catholic health care providers to reduce emergency room and hospital readmissions for the newly housed by 25% and connect 35% of the housed individuals with primary care and behavioral health services.

Someone is typically considered chronically homeless if they’ve experienced long-term homelessness and have a documented disability, including addiction or mental illness.

There is frequently an overlap between the chronically homeless individuals served by Catholic Charities agencies and the chronic patients admitted to ERs and hospitals, “so it makes sense we tackle these issues together,” said Robert

McCann, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington. The Spokane-based nonprofit participated in the pilot along with counterparts in Las Vegas, Detroit, St. Louis and Portland, and their respective dioceses supported the effort.

According to a report shared with NCR,

approximately 500 chronically homeless people, or nearly 72% of Catholic Charities’ goal, have been housed so far. Delaware State University recently began an evaluation of the pilot, and Curtis Johnson, vice president of housing strategy for Catholic Charities USA, said the results will likely be published in early 2025.

“Catholic Charities is right in the middle of this issue of chronic homelessness and has been for a long time,” said Steve Berg, chief policy officer for the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “They aren’t afraid to take it on as an issue and really work to find the best way to approach it.”

Johnson said the pilot cities have successfully addressed housing in diverse ways, with not all building new units.

Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington has been a major housing producer, “while St. Louis folks have said — we work with local landlords and find existing properties for our residents because we know how long the development process can take,” he said.

The Spokane-based Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington already had served as a model for others wanting to tackle supportive housing projects. Two decades ago, there were nine affordable housing complexes in eastern Washington; now there are 67, reflecting 1,600 permanent supportive housing units.

“I’m hoping by the time I retire I see a landscape where most of the 160 or so local Catholic Charities in this country are actively involved in building housing in this kind of fashion,” said McCann.

There are studies that indicate permanent supportive housing can improve mental and physical health, but the Catholic Charities initiative attempts to boost the level of medical services residents can access and their overall health outcomes.

Chronically homeless individuals frequently are “the most medically fragile, most ill people in a community who aren’t already in a hospital or in some form of assisted living,” McCann said.

It is no surprise that homeless people have higher rates of hospital and ER use than the general population, and «unless you help solve their medical issues, it’s going to be a lot harder to stay in that housing,» said McCann.

The pilot’s success so far includes a 57% drop in ER visits for the 17 homeless individuals housed by Detroit-based Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan, which partnered with Ascension Healthcare.

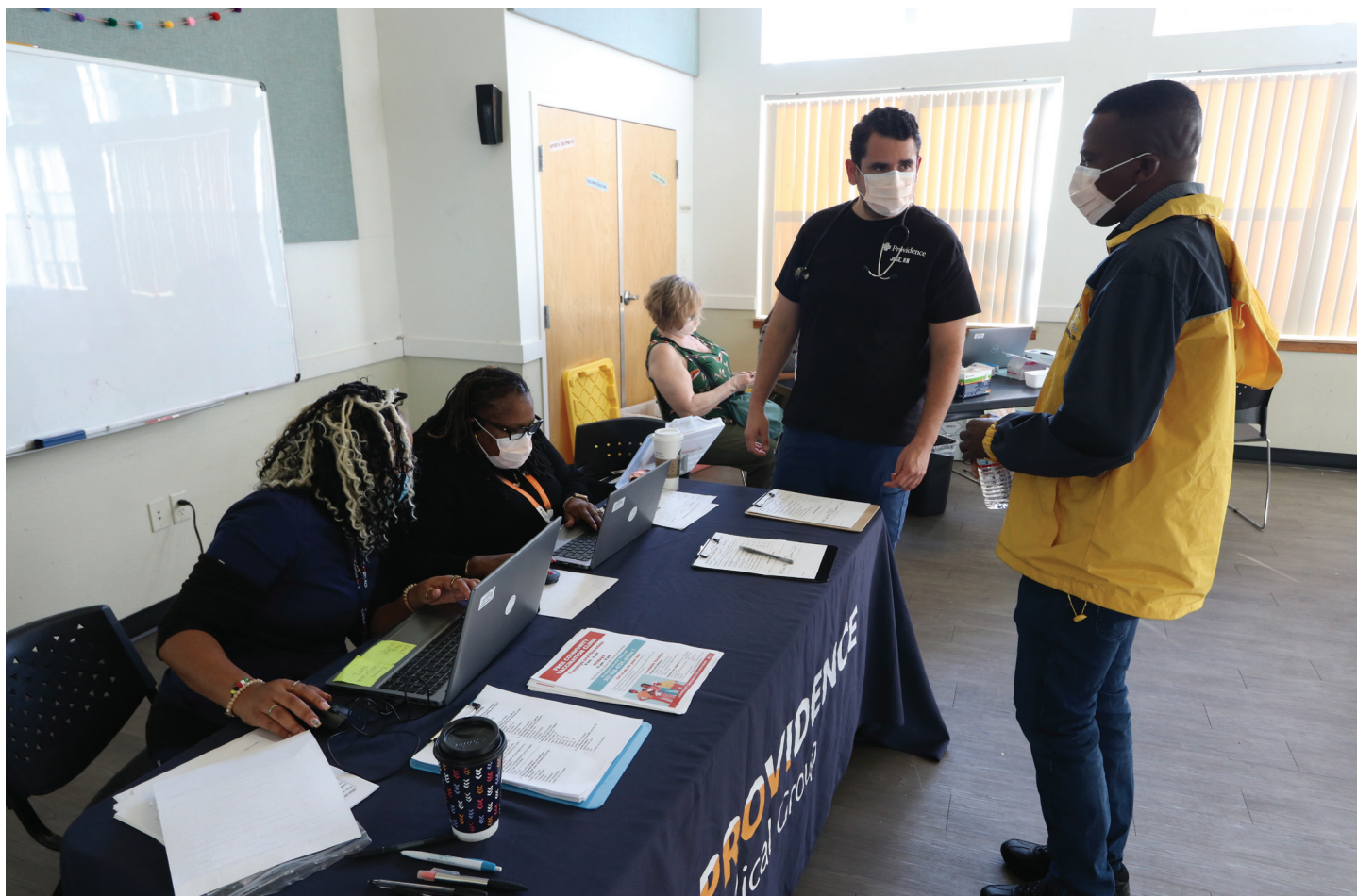
In Oregon, Providence Health & Services has



Curtis Johnson, vice president of housing strategy for Catholic Charities USA (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA)



Gonzaga Family Haven, an affordable housing complex built by Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington, opened in 2021 and includes 73 units of permanent supportive housing. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington)



Kamica Armenta, Teresa Johnson and nurse Jose Zaragoza, all from Providence Medical Group, tend to a patient during a health fair this fall at Kateri Park, an affordable housing community operated by Catholic Charities of Oregon. The health fair was a result of Catholic Charities USA's Healthy Housing Initiative. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Oregon)

held health fairs at Catholic Charities' affordable housing locations.

There is a "huge medical value" to the fairs but "also a real behavioral health benefit that addresses the social isolation many people have felt," said Rachel Smith, senior program manager with Providence.

She recalled one fair where an individual learned they had diabetes and very high glucose levels.

"It was getting to a point where it was dangerous for them, but we were able to catch that in a place where they felt safe and comfortable," Smith said. "They were able to come down to the community room, and they had friends around that could offer support. It was powerful."

Imperfect but 'a godsend'

Although decades of research show coupling housing with services is an effective way to care for people who are chronically homeless, a range of difficulties constrain more widespread, successful permanent supportive housing projects.

There needs to be more permanent supportive housing and "more money from any source would be good," said Berg, noting the model has been funded by everything from private donations to hospital revenues. "But the only source capable of getting to the scale that's needed is the federal government."

Homelessness advocates often point to the reduction in chronically homeless veterans as an example of what could be possible with a heftier financial commitment from the federal government. Its investment in permanent supportive housing for vets meant New York City virtually eliminated chronic homelessness among the group, and since 2010 the homeless U.S. veteran population fell by 55%.

Leone said that despite studies affirming supportive housing does not increase local crime or reduce property values, NIMBYism continues to be a big challenge, and it can add on years to projects.



Rose Bak, chief program officer at Catholic Charities of Oregon (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Oregon)

for difficult work, and excessive caseloads, according to experts, and there are very long wait times for units – it can take up to five years for such housing in Portland.

At the same time, some advocates believe there are glitches around who gets prioritized.

For most permanent supportive housing, communities are required to use what’s called coordinated entry, through which people with the

most urgent needs are given housing priority.

Rose Bak, chief program officer at Catholic Charities of Oregon, said individuals who engage most with public services and health care systems tend to score higher on the list, and those who engage less – transgender individuals, women and homeless youths, for example – don’t score as well.

“There are self-identified women who we’ve known a long time, who have been homeless a long time and that have a lot of vulnerability, but they don’t score high on that list because they haven’t been arrested a lot, haven’t been to the hospital much,” said Bak.

She added there are some efforts underway nationally to address “what can be a skewed system.”

Securing funds for the supportive services is one of the biggest challenges, according to advocates.



Kateri Park is a Catholic Charities of Oregon affordable housing complex in Southeast Portland that includes 20 permanent supportive housing units. Part of dealing with NIMBYism is to “run efficient, well-managed and beautiful spaces,” said Curtis Johnson, vice president of housing strategy for Catholic Charities USA. Catholic Charities agencies’ budgets “are not huge, but we want residents to be proud to live there.” (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Oregon)

“You can get bricks-and-mortar money from tax credits and money to pay the rent from Section 8 vouchers, but to get the money to pay for services, you’ve got to go pound the pavement,” said McCann.

Johnson said an objective of the Catholic Charities USA pilot is to track any cost savings to health systems or to insurers that could then “be leveraged to encourage investment in affordable housing and help fund those supportive services.”

“Paying for affordable housing is like quilt making,” he said. “You get a bit from here and another from there, and then you build the thing.”

Due to Medicaid expansion, more states can use Medicaid funds to cover primary, behavioral and mental health services. (An experiment within the Medicaid program enables some states to use Medicaid funds for rent and utilities, something Catholic Charities USA and its member agencies have advocated for.)

But properly billing Medicaid to get reimbursed for services is complicated, and nonprofit staff don’t always know how to do it.

Leone said she believes permanent supportive housing ultimately is a cost-effective investment for communities because “it is cheaper to fund supportive housing up front, and to get people in it quickly, than it is to let them languish in shelters, jails and prison or on the street.”

She pointed out that Los Angeles saved 20% overall after launching a permanent supportive housing program for nearly 1,000 individuals.

In 2020, California researchers shared results from a randomized trial of chronically homeless people in Santa Clara County. They found that individuals in permanent supportive housing had fewer psychiatric emergency room visits and shelter use, “which also reduces costs,” said Leone.

But she added that anti-development sentiment from both the political left and the right makes it “very challenging” to build and maintain permanent supportive housing at the scale that is needed.

Marisa Zapata is director of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative and a professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University. She emphasizes cost shouldn’t be an excuse not to build more housing. She thinks it would be better if people would “accept that public housing happens at a significant loss, that it’s not always going to pencil out.”

An additional obstacle for supportive housing is tied to attacks on the “housing first” approach.



Marisa Zapata is director of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative and a professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University. “Permanent supportive housing is the most evidenced-based solution to chronic homelessness that exists,” she said. (Courtesy of Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative)



Robert McCann, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington)

Housing first supports people being housed without preconditions or barriers such as sobriety or treatment. It stresses the need for services, but it’s not a specific program like permanent supportive housing. Many supportive housing programs, however, operate under the philosophy.

Critics say housing first ignores people’s underlying issues, is ineffective and funds should go toward programs that require employment or sobriety.

A conservative think tank in Texas called the Cicero Institute says on its website that “permanent supportive housing doesn’t address homelessness — it creates demand for more homelessness and supports cronyism.”

The organization created model legislation, and at least a half-dozen states have introduced or passed bills based on the template. Missouri was the first to pass a bill that included language preventing state and federal funds for homelessness to be used on permanent supportive housing.

McCann said some people will argue that chronic homelessness had gone up recently because of the federal housing first policy. “That’s simply not true,” he said. “It’s no more true than to say the reason there are more cases of childhood cancer is because this country built more children’s hospitals.”

He cited the high prices and low inventory of housing as among the true primary drivers of the increase.

survival, you are not going to be able to address something like a behavioral health issue,” said McCann. “It is not something even discussable until you get to a stable place, to stable housing.”

Zapata acknowledged there are communities having a hard time implementing permanent supportive housing and housing first as they were intended.

“But studies show they are still better than the alternatives, like shelters or living outside or mandated service requirements,” she said.

Before Thanksgiving, Eve moved into her new home, a one-bedroom apartment in permanent supportive housing, as part of Catholic Charities USA’s initiative.

She now has a car and said she tries to aid others experiencing homelessness when she can, regularly driving people to various Portland charities for food or services.

With the stability of permanent housing, she was able to recently have surgery to care for her severe dental issues. She hoped to be fully recovered well before Christmas.

“Catholic Charities has helped me in every way possible, especially when I’ve been particularly down,” said Eve. “They are a godsend.”

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



St. Charles Borromeo Holy Family Service Center in North Hollywood, California (Tom Hoffarth)

HOLY FAMILY SERVICE CENTER REACHES OUT TO HOMELESS OF THE HOLLYWOOD SPLIT

by
TOM HOFFARTH

December 29, 2023

▶ STORY

A triad of freeways intermingle a few blocks away from the St. Charles Borromeo Holy Family Service Center in North Hollywood. This is where the main artery of the U.S. 101 cuts east-west across the San Fernando Valley and can be confusing to commuters when it frays into the 134 Ventura Freeway and 170 Hollywood Freeway. Southern California traffic reporters refer to this navigational pivot point as the Hollywood Split.

The network of created underpasses has been a popular gathering spot for those experiencing homelessness. Pedestrians, already skittish trying to navigate tents and tarps assembled two and three deep on darkened sidewalks, usually can't access the sidewalks.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, trying to make good on election promises, has activated a program to break up homeless congregations and try to move them into temporary shelter.

"So they're gone now," said Deacon Louis Roche Jr., the Holy Family Service outreach director.



Deacon Louis Roche Jr. at his office inside St. Charles Borromeo Holy Family Service Center in North Hollywood, California (Tom Hoffarth)

He blinked and a second later added: “Well, they’re not gone. They’re just not there anymore. And therein lies the problem. The problems of the unhoused have not been addressed. They’ve just been pushed down the road to become someone else’s problem.”

Split up and frayed themselves, the unhoused still aren’t difficult to find in the concentrated pockets of poverty that are often incongruent with and overlooked by the affluence of multimillion-dollar Toluca Lake homes bordering tourist attractions like Universal Studios and the Hollywood sign.

It is an area Roche still considers his neighborhood. It has become a full-circle experience, as this is where he grew up, attending St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School, in classrooms that were once on the site of the current Holy Family Service Center. Roche and many of the volunteers from the parish have had careers, or still do, in the local television and motion picture industry.

In carrying forward a church outreach program that began in 1984, Roche orchestrates assistance to more than 900 people every month. Services include the distribution of food, clothing, toiletries, bedding, toys and books. Hot meals, haircuts and showers are offered to the unhoused every Thursday morning.

The center is an expansive Spanish-style facility completed in 2009 on what had been a part of the church’s main parking lot. It was a result of the groundwork done by Msgr. Thomas Kiefer, who died in 2006 at the age of 87. Some of the funding for the facility came from the estate of Bob and Dolores Hope, whose home was not far from the church.

Roche’s empathetic response to the multilevel problematic realities of homelessness has manifested itself in the local Catholic community’s developing trust relationships with those experiencing distress, working to make their lives more tolerable.

“I feel we are integrated,” said Roche. “Those in need are a big part of our community and worthy of the

“You can hand out cards all day and say, ‘Call me and I’ll see what I can do for you,’ but it really comes down to a trust issue when dealing with people in distress. There’s a lot of moving parts and one size never fits all.”

— Deacon Joe Roche Jr.

same dignity and respect we ourselves desire. As a society, it is important we learn to display mutual respect for one another. After all, in reality, we are all part of this same community.

“Our clients find a sacred space, where they can forgive and forget, if only for a short while. That is how we try to connect words with actions.”

Hot meals lead to companionship

As the nearby NoHo Home Alliance does outreach on Mondays and Fridays, Holy Family Services is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Each day about 50 individuals who register and show IDs have access to supplies.

The ministry relies on resources procured from organizations such as the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, local grocery stores, and parishioner donations.

The Thursday morning program concentrates on those 100 regulars and an expanding rank and file of new guests experiencing homeless issues. The program starts at 8 a.m. with coffee and breakfast.

Clothes distribution from a well-stocked and sorted boutique happens at the center entrance. At the end of the parking lot farthest from the corner of Laker Shim and Moorpark Boulevards, guests access a portable shower and receive haircuts from a volunteer barber.

Hot meals prepared in the kitchen — on this day, roasted chicken, street corn, potatoes, green beans and biscuits — are also given out in large containers.

Devon, 36, one of the clients waiting in line for a haircut, said he has been coming to the center for five years.

“I put myself in this situation thinking I was too grown up and I should have been more patient,” he said. “I’m just trying to move forward. This place is a huge stepping stone for me. The people here are always kind and courteous, helping me wear down the stress. I love the companionship here. We’re like one big family. Very dysfunctional, but very much a family.”

Michael, 32, said he was OK on this day the mobile shower wasn’t available — the person who drives the truck from San Fernando Valley Rescue Mission to

the site came down with COVID. Michael explained how he wouldn’t have found this facility except that someone from the Hope of the Valley Navigation Center drove him there after seeing him once charging his phone outside a liquor store nearby.

“The man named Bill gave me some socks, brought me here,” said Michael. “I got some clothes, blankets, shoes ... and some love.”

Michael added that when he can afford it, he has found temporary shelter at the Studio Lodge nearby, but otherwise, “I’m living on the streets. I’m also dying there.”

Anabel Martinez, volunteering three days a week at Holy Family Service Center the last six years, has been one of the lifelines for Devon and Michael. She has encouraged Michael to continue taking classes in search of a business degree at Los Angeles Trade Tech.

“You don’t know their issues until you’ve been there,” said Martinez, 59, who explained her own homeless and drug-addict experiences for a five-year period. “If you really want to know why they’re homeless, it’s really very sad. Deep down they’re good people. All you need to do is listen. Sometimes all they need is a hug and a good cry, and they will tell you the sweetest things.”

Cybal Hall, a St. Charles parishioner for nearly 40 years, heads up special events at the center, including the annual toy drive that helps about 100 local families. She estimates the homeless community here has doubled in the last 10 years. They are seeing more younger Russian and Ukraine families come for assistance.

“When I was younger, I dreamed I’d be a nun,” said Hall, known for making banana bread and hard-boiling eggs for the guests. “Motherhood wanted me more. So, this is the closest I think I’ve come to having a calling and finding the rewards of helping others.”

Surviving another night

Roche, a photographer and musician by trade, said a freelance job in Southeast Asia once took him to the orphanage in India run by Mother Teresa.



Michael, one of the guests of St. Charles Borromeo Holy Family Service Center in North Hollywood, California (Tom Hoffarth)

“The poverty in Kolkata was staggering,” he said. “That experience changed my life, and somehow I needed to give back.”

It led him to the diaconate program, and he was ordained in 2016. He also became director of the Holy Family Service Center that year.

Roche explained how he occasionally leaves his small apartment next to the church and walks the neighborhood at night listening to stories of the locals in need. He is curious as to how they got to where they are and what they need to do to survive another night.

“On one occasion, a young lady sleeping in the doorway of a local business asked if I could get her a black jacket that extended all the way down to the ground,” he said. “Just so that ‘people who pass me don’t know I’m a woman, and I can cover up and try to blend in.’ “

Kitchen volunteer Jackie Torres, an actress and TV producer who has been a parishioner at St. Charles since 1995, lives in an apartment three buildings west of the center. She admits to having to ask for the center’s food services at down points in her life.

The Puerto Rican native said encountering a homeless man from El Salvador named Guillermo, whom she prayed with on the steps of her apartment to talk him out of suicide, inspired her to want to volunteer.

Volunteers had taken Guillermo to rehab facilities on many occasions, only to see him resist. He now has an apartment in North Hollywood, thanks to volunteers who pooled their resources. He has come back to the facility on occasion to thank the volunteers for their kindness.

“The deacon is a saint for what he does here,” said Torres. “Working here means everything to my faith. It’s pure joy. We know they can find food and clothes at different places. But here is community, and it’s mutual.”

Roche told another story of a man named John he encountered sitting in front of the church, his face covered.

Roche asked if he needed anything. There was no response. After several more attempts, Roche got him



Jackie Torres near the entrance to the kitchen at Holy Family Service Center (Tom Hoffarth)

to come across the street to the Holy Family Services Center.

After receiving food and clothing, John held up his phone for Roche to read a message he had typed: “I am unable to speak or hear. Thank you for everything. God Bless you all.”

Roche, alluding to how guests won’t fully engage in frequent service provider fairs with pop-up booths offering housing and other resources, said he has come to realize the power of establishing long-term rapport and harmonious communication when trying to assist the unhoused.

“You can hand out cards all day and say, ‘Call me and I’ll see what I can do for you,’ but it really comes down to a trust issue when dealing with people in distress,” he said. “There’s a lot of moving parts and one size never fits all.

“I don’t look at homelessness as necessarily being without a roof, it’s about having nothing that’s concrete. The bottom line is creativity to help solve people’s problems.

“At the Holy Family Service Ministry, we try to see everyone as being an individual, with individual

wants and needs. We try to provide an environment where there is always something positive to look forward to, even if that means just a kind greeting or a compassionate ear. If people stop respecting themselves, then they are likely to enter into a much darker place than they are already in.

“The living Gospel of those unhoused is also a reality that Mary, Joseph and Jesus found themselves in more than 2,000 years ago. Let us do our best to provide for the needs of those who find themselves living and dying on the streets. I’m hoping for the day when we see the number of individuals that we serve in decline. Maybe that means that we’ve helped them get to the next level.”

Editor’s note: A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 19-Feb 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: *Holy Family Service Center reaches out to homeless in Hollywood Split.*

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Pedestrians pass by a homeless tent adorned with an American flag across the street from the Los Angeles Mission in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles Nov. 22, 2023. (AP/Jae C. Hong)

HOMELESSNESS CRISIS SHOWS OUR COUNTRY NEEDS A NEW NATIONAL STORY



by

DAVID E. DECOSSE

January 2, 2024

▶ STORY

Before serving several hundred unhoused persons on Skid Row, volunteers at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker Hippy Kitchen invoke the prophetic prayer of St. Vincent de Paul over beans and bread about the day's work ahead: «It is only for your love that the poor will forgive you the bread that you give them.»

The first time I heard the words of St. Vincent, I was offended. Why should I be forgiven for serving the poor?

But over the years, the wisdom of the prayer has become clearer. When I hand out bread in a soup line, do I do so with a love founded on the conviction that the person who receives the bread is fully equal in dignity with me?

Moreover, do I do so with the conviction that the love of my neighbor who receives the bread is not directed at an “othered” human unit in the mass category of the “unfortunate,” but at a real person who in their longings for life and love, in the words of philosopher Simone Weil, is “exactly like us”?

Lastly, is such an egalitarian love marked by a spirit of reflective repentance for

“When I hand out bread in a soup line,
do I do so with a love founded on the conviction that the person
who receives the bread is fully equal in dignity with me?”

– David E. Decosse

what I have done and not done to create the culture and structures that fuel the poverty in which the poor find themselves seeking a piece of bread?

I thought often of my newfound appreciation for St. Vincent’s prayer as I read the story of a society unraveling contained in the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness. The report was released in June 2023 by the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative of the University of California, San Francisco.

Called the most extensive examination of homelessness in the United States in the last decades, the report deftly uses statistics and stories to show how on any given day 171,000 persons in a state with the fifth largest economy in the world are unhoused and caught up in scenarios ranging from living in a car to dying alone in a tent in the woods on the edge of town.

Upon its release in June, the report received extensive coverage for debunking common myths. The primary cause of homelessness in California is not a mix of mental illness and addiction (as conservative critics argue), but the lack of affordable housing.

“Higher rates of homelessness correlate with higher costs of housing,” Margot Kushel, the study’s lead investigator, said at an October presentation at Santa Clara University.

Moreover, nine in 10 of those who are homeless in California became homeless in California. The Golden State is not playing host to out-of-state legions hoping to sleep unsheltered on the beach.

Other findings in the study show the precarity of persons in the face of what seems like a tidal wave pushing them onto the streets. In the six months prior to their homelessness, the median monthly household income of a study participant was \$960. At the same time, the average monthly rent of a studio apartment in the state was \$1,400.

One thing that goes wrong starts a slide to the street. The study tells the story of Carlos, who “experienced a spinal injury when he fell off a ladder at work.”

Unable to continue working and ineligible to

receive workers’ compensation since he was paid in cash, Carlos could no longer afford the rent for his apartment. As the leaseholder, he decided to vacate the apartment to avoid having an eviction on his record. He then rented a room in a two-bedroom apartment, but left after several months due to conflicts with his roommates. Carlos hoped that moving in with his sister’s family would provide a long-term solution to his housing situation, but her family was facing COVID-related job loss and a shortage of space. Wanting to avoid being a burden to his family and without other options, Carlos became homeless, living in his truck. After receiving multiple parking tickets, his truck was towed. He now lives in an encampment in a park near City Hall.

Who are the unhoused?

According to the report, Black (at 26%) and Indigenous (at 12%) persons are overrepresented in the tally of the unhoused, relative to the percent of their respective populations in California.

Moreover, 49% of persons in the study became homeless from a living situation in which their name was neither on a mortgage nor on a lease.

Another 20% of persons in the study became homeless directly from an institutional setting like a jail or prison. One person in the study described the free fall from jail to the street: “[They said] ‘Thank you,’ cut your bracelet off, and off you go. There’s nothing. They don’t know if you’re going to go out and going to be homeless, if you’re going back to being homeless, they don’t — they don’t ask any of that.”

The average length of homelessness is 22 months. Twenty percent of unhoused persons live in their vehicles. In the course of encampment closures, one-third of study participants lost items like identification cards, cellphones, and medications — which, among other things, are crucial tools for finding housing.

Fifty-two percent of unhoused persons are unable to work due to issues related to age, health, or disability.

More than half of unhoused persons were



Tenants hold a community rally in the Baldwin Hills neighborhood in Los Angeles Jan. 8, 2023, urging that their buildings, home to 40 families and more than 100 low-income tenants, not be sold to investors. (AP/Damian Dovarganes)

assessed to have fair to poor health compared to 22% with a similar health status in the general United States population. Sixty-six percent of study participants reported mental health symptoms.

Such persons also described “how homelessness worsened their mental health symptoms through a variety of mechanisms, including inability to maintain medications that had kept them stable, lack of sleep, experiences of violence, and experiences of shame and stigma associated with homelessness.”

One-third of study participants reported regular use of cocaine, amphetamines or non-prescription opioids.

One study participant described the roundabout search for housing vouchers: ‘You just stay on that waiting list forever and ever and ever.’

Once you lose your housing, it’s an all-but futile battle to get it back, Kushel said. On the one hand, the statewide housing supply numbers work against you. The study reported that California has “only 24 units of housing available and affordable for every 100 extremely low-income households.”

On the other hand, things that could be helpful — like Section 8 government housing vouchers to help cover the cost of rent — are available in one county but not in another, or are all-but impossible to find.

One study participant described the roundabout search for vouchers: “You just stay on that waiting list forever and ever and ever. I mean, I stayed on it one time. My ex was on it. We both were on it, but she actually ended up getting picked for the voucher, but they never told her. And then they couldn’t find her on the list. After she got selected, she went to go meet with them, and they couldn’t find her on the list anymore.”

Homelessness: Who benefits?

Consistent with St. Vincent’s challenging prayer, the work of Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond suggests an approach to this fraying reality in which unhoused persons seem to live outside society and are blamed for doing so.

In a recent article adapted from his book *Poverty, by America*, he said: “The question that should serve as a looping incantation, the one we should ask every time we drive past a tent encampment ... is simply: *Who benefits?* Not: *Why don’t you find a better job?* Or: *Why don’t you move?* Or: *Why don’t you stop taking out payday loans?* But: *Who is feeding off this?*”

Desmond’s questions compel us to consider our role in fostering the culture and structures that have left so many in California living by the side of the road. How have we benefited from single-family zoning that keeps the cost of housing high and the supply of housing low? How have we benefited from living in de facto segregated municipalities with lower tax bases — municipalities created decades ago often precisely to get



Maurice Palmer waits with his possessions as a homeless encampment is removed in San Francisco Aug. 29, 2023. Homeless people and their advocates say crackdowns on tent encampments are cruel and costly, and there aren't enough homes or beds for everyone. (AP/Jeff Chiu)

away from perceived burdens of inner-city poverty?

How have we benefited from federal tax breaks (like the mortgage interest deduction) valued at \$70 billion annually while federal Section 8 rental housing vouchers valued at \$20 billion annually have impossibly long lines of applicants and run out annually anyhow?

The writer Joan Didion had a sharp eye for the sentimental stories we tell ourselves that hide the actual, often destructive workings of society. Of course, she was best known for applying this eye to California. But a comment she made about New York City is especially apt: “Lady Liberty, huddled masses, ticker-tape parades, heroes, gutters ... eight million stories and all the same story, each devised to obscure not only the city’s actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly, the civic and commercial arrangements that rendered those tensions irreconcilable.”

In California now, we tell ourselves a lot of stories: the late-baby-boomer autonomy-loving story; the Silicon Valley lonely entrepreneur story; the techno-optimist libertarian story; the rags-to-riches movie and music star story; the go-west-and-discover-yourself story; the immigrant pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps story; even the Napa Institute culture-war Catholic story.

But the unhoused person living on the street for two years has no part in these stories. We need a new story



A line of weathered homeless RVs stretches along a street as the sun sets behind the Los Angeles skyline Sept. 18, 2023. (AP/Jae C. Hong)

in which we are bound in love and justice to the tens of thousands of persons living and dying on our streets. St. Vincent: Pray for us.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, interacts with townspeople in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco in November. Most of the homes there were destroyed in a 6.8 magnitude earthquake Sept. 8 that killed about 3,000 people. Murray says that despite differences in language, ethnicity and religion, people all over the world value family, faith, friendships and community. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)

DISASTER RELIEF ORGANIZATION LEADER LEANS ON CATHOLIC FAITH

by
TOM HOFFARTH

January 18, 2024

▶ STORY

In a Las Vegas hotel meeting room on a Saturday morning in December, 50-some volunteers of ShelterBox USA sat with equal doses of inspiration and humility. The ambassadors, as they are called, focused on Kerri Murray, the nonprofit organization's president for the last eight years, as she moved through a PowerPoint presentation of graphics, photos and charts that explained the accomplishments of the nonprofit disaster relief organization over the last year.

Murray could also give a firsthand account of a trip she took just weeks earlier to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. ShelterBox had responded to some of the tens of thousands of people displaced by a 6.8 magnitude earthquake on Sept 8, which killed nearly 3,000. Murray emphasized that it was evident local relief agencies and government offices were only able to respond with limited efficiency.

This was nothing new for ShelterBox, which, in 24 years of existence on the global level based in the United Kingdom, has been able to connect directly with more than 3 million left homeless by natural disasters and conflict. ShelterBox's prepackaged

“Working on the frontlines, sure, we give people tents and tarps and solar lights and tools — that’s the first step in the recovery process. But we give people hope too, coming from across the world to care about them.”

— Kerry Alys Robinson

survival kits, custom-made for every situation, can contain essentials that include high-performance tents, stainless steel cooking sets, solar lanterns, water purification kits, blankets, bedding, tools and hygiene packages.

But the work is far from over as more than 110 million people are displaced at some point around the world today.

“We have a heavy responsibility to do more,” Murray told the energized room, many affiliated with the Rotary International.

On a personal level, Murray finds that responsibility related to her Catholic roots, shaped in Naugatuck, Connecticut, and accelerated at Providence College in Rhode Island.

The 50-year-old Murray, based in Summerland, California, just outside Santa Barbara, discussed with the National Catholic Reporter how her value system based on a Catholic upbringing has led to this moment. Following is our Q&A, edited for clarity and length.

NCR: How would you describe the ways your Catholic faith mesh with your work at ShelterBox?

Murray: We’re in a world that’s very divided, and I work for an organization that’s not only apolitical but nonreligious. We have to separate ourselves from the politics and maintain that level of focus on the humanitarian needs. But I also do feel in the work that we do, those who tend to gravitate toward helping are people of faith — and particularly people from the Catholic faith.

My faith has been important in how it guides me to making decisions and the values I underscore through my life, not just in a humanitarian sense but also as a mother (of a 19-year-old daughter). The most important trait that was woven throughout my upbringing in the church was empathy, having the ability to understand and feel another person’s feelings. My faith was instrumental in living a life of service, caring for others and giving what you have.

I believe I developed a sense of consciousness



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA since 2015, addresses a Las Vegas ballroom of ambassadors during an annual appreciation gathering on Dec. 2. (Tom Hoffarth)

growing up in a family of deep faith, and I feel a massive responsibility to help others, particularly those much more vulnerable. In disasters and conflict zones, those most often are women, children, the elderly and the disabled. At ShelterBox, we focus our humanitarian efforts on the poorest and most fragile places in the world, locations where people don’t have a safety net in a disaster.

What are some of the important markers growing up that connect you to social justice principles and a belief in equity for all?

My family grew up very working class and we went to church weekly, did all the sacraments. Not a lot



ShelterBox tents in Morocco in November show how villagers set up their new homes. Survivors of the 6.8 magnitude earthquake on Sept. 8 could also be seen putting wooden fencing around the tents, planting crops and making additions to their new homes. About 3,000 people were killed in the earthquake. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)

of extras for my parents working hard with three kids. It wasn't uncommon to pull the cushions off the couch to try to find quarters so my mom could buy milk. I look back now and it was just another family struggling to make ends meet but I found my family always giving to others.

My parents had a very small home goods store on Church Street, which was the main street, and I worked there after school. They were always quietly helping others. I would see Rocky come in to collect bags of aluminum cans that could be recycled for his dialysis treatment. There were the regular people from our community who came by to borrow a couple of dollars in the beginning of the week that they would pay back at the end of the week.

Your parents steered you into a Catholic school upbringing as well. How did that play out?

My primary education, K through eighth grade, was at the school next to St. Francis of Assisi Church, the same grammar school my father went to. My brother worked in the rectory. My dad volunteered on church projects. Sadly, St. Francis School closed in 2018. I remember in grammar school when the Challenger space shuttle disaster happened. My dad and I wanted to do something. We used fabrics from the store and made a huge felt banner that hung in the school's main office for years titled, "Let Us Not Forget," a remembrance to the astronauts and the teacher who lost her life.

I think that moment of grief was indicative of wanting to be of action and service. In the eighth grade when they were giving out superlatives like, "Best Looking" and "Most Popular," I was given, "Most Service to the School" – maybe not something that everyone would have wanted, but for me, I felt optimistic and helpful. I have always wanted to be one of those people who left something better than I found it. It was as simple as that. I was very proud of that recognition. From there, going to Holy Cross High School in Waterbury, those were some of the most important and formative years of my life.

Moving onto Providence College and launching into the business world with a political science and business degree had to take all that social justice work to another level, right?

Providence College was another community of people of faith, but also an area where I had the opportunity to lean in and get involved in more things interesting to me – working in the public defender's office, service with women in prison, getting involved in environmental issues and becoming the first lobbyist for the Save the Bay organization. In my senior year at Providence, I had an interview with the Peace Corps and they informed



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, delivers blankets to people in Ukraine in February 2023. ShelterBox has worked in places including Ethiopia, the Philippines, Cameroon, Yemen, Turkey and Syria. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, sits with Fadma, whose husband was crushed in the Sept. 8 earthquake in Morocco. Murray gave the widow relief supplies, and Fadma — wearing white as a sign of mourning — took Murray to the site of her destroyed home. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)

me that they needed people with specialized skills — engineering, farming, teaching. I knew I wanted to gain more skills and go back to serve again, but I didn't know where.

Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, sits with Fadma, whose husband was crushed in the Sept. 8 earthquake in Morocco. Murray gave the widow relief supplies, and Fadma — wearing white as a sign of mourning — took Murray to the site of her destroyed home. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)

Since I needed to pay back student loans, it meant going into corporate life for 14 years at the large pharmaceutical company, GlaxoSmithKline. In 2009, the company piloted the Pulse Program, taking executives and sending them to nonprofit organizations to transfer skills to humanitarian relief organizations. I was just a single mom at the time with a 5-year-old, but for six months, I picked up and moved with my daughter to help transform a 60-year-old medical relief organization, lending them my business skills.

One month into my role — in January 2010 — a massive earthquake devastated Haiti, killing more than 250,000 and displacing millions. I had little experience in disaster relief but learned quickly that I could apply the skills I acquired in business and help this nonprofit which was saving lives in Haiti after the earthquake. I traveled to Haiti, and one of

the first places I went was just awful — a morgue in an overwhelmed hospital that was used to store bodies of young children who were victims of the earthquake. I felt immediately connected to those people and the trauma they experienced, and I knew then that my life's work was better leveraged in helping the most vulnerable people recover.

I stepped off the corporate ladder and worked to transform that medical relief organization for five years. By the end of 2015, it led me to join ShelterBox USA as its president and I can't imagine doing anything else.

ShelterBox has worked in the Ukraine, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Cameroon, Yemen, Turkey, Syria and more. Your relief work has enabled you to experience a variety of religious beliefs and customs. What do you find universal among the faith cultures?

When I was recently in the affected villages of the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and people were speaking Berber, we worked through translators to communicate. I felt an immediate connection to the people we were serving and everywhere we worked I was reminded that despite any cultural or religious differences the things we hold most dear, the things we value and appreciate are very similar. Family, faith, friendships and community are threaded



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, hands out bagged supply kits in Morocco in November, about two months after a 6.8 magnitude earthquake killed about 3,000 people. Murray says stainless steel cookware sets are invaluable. Many survivors are widowed women who must cook for their families. (Courtesy of ShelterBox USA)

throughout every place I have been.

In Morocco after the earthquake, I met many women dressed in all white who were widows. Moroccan people wear white rather than black while grieving, as they associate white with calmness and tranquility. I met a woman named Fadma, whom I gave cooking sets and relief supplies early in the day, and she came back to share with me the story about her husband who had been crushed in the earthquake. She took me to her destroyed home. We quickly built a bond and by the day's end, she was so overwhelmed with emotion that she hugged and held me. She remarked that she couldn't believe people from the United States came to help her in her time of need. In those moments, it's the ability to heal – not just with the physical goods, but those emotional needs we help do through the grace of God. It meant so much to her, but it meant even more to me.

You seem to have a unique capacity to not only have that business experience of important fundraising for this program but also the empathy to be there at the sites, resourceful and nimble to listen to their needs. That is not a common combination, is it?

Different people have different gifts. I think for me it is connecting to the people we are helping with a deep sense of compassion. My role is to then translate that and amplify their voices. Working on the frontlines, sure, we give people tents and tarps and solar lights and tools – that's the first step in the recovery process. But we give people hope too, coming from across the world to care about them.

Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, appears on CNN in November for a story on ShelterBox's assistance following the Sept. 8 earthquake in Morocco. (Screenshot/CNN)

In your presentation, you pointed out that ShelterBox USA believes conservatively more than 200 million will be displaced by 2050, and as many as a billion. You are also in a position to educate those who



Kerri Murray, president of ShelterBox USA, appears on CNN in November for a story on ShelterBox's assistance following the Sept. 8 earthquake in Morocco. (Screenshot/CNN)

might not fully understand why your organization is needed more than ever. Your presentation in Las Vegas also set a goal to make more people aware of how climate change is contributing to these increasingly major natural disasters. It is part of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, about care for the planet. How can your Catholic faith advance that kind of messaging and communicate that as part of your outreach?

The poorest countries have done the least to cause the problem, but they are being hit the hardest by more intense droughts and floods and storms. It's vital for humanitarian relief organizations to build resources for people to be better prepared for disasters that are becoming more intense and displacing even more people. It's not an "if" but "when" situation for many countries endemic to disasters. Our work is increasing so much. I do see what is unique and special to the Catholic faith is people caring about other people and wanting to go out across the world aside from helping locally. These are people you'll never meet, but whose lives you

are transforming. I hope organizations like ours can connect the world that way.

Your ShelterBox mission statement talks of supporting "the world's most vulnerable people ... as we listen and adapt our support to the needs of each community." You must feel like a missionary in some ways?

I would say yes. Tapping into all the things I'm uniquely given as gifts and working through my faith has allowed me to be there. The one thing I have always noticed about disasters: In the worst of times, you see the best of humanity.

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.

Saints in the Medieval Church

- St Francis of Assisi and St Clare
 - Influential for Italian people in the 1200s
 - Part of the mendicant orders
 - Founded to help poor people
 - Founded to help poor people
 - Attracted many people to the common life
 - People turned to God and prayer
- Preached about the importance of meditation
- Monks and nuns lived in communities. The...



Claire McManmon teaches social studies on a recent afternoon at St. Martin of Tours School in San Jose, California. The 28-year-old pays \$1,000 a month to live in a former parish convent; the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in the region is more than double that amount. (Courtesy of Claire McManmon)

PARISHES TURN FORMER CONVENTS INTO AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR TEACHERS



by
**KATIE COLLINS
SCOTT**

February 12, 2024

STORY

Claire McManmon did not become a Catholic school educator for a massive paycheck, but she also hoped she wouldn't have to scramble to cover rent.

So when the 28-year-old's sister and brother-in-law encouraged her to move from the Midwest to San Jose, California, she was hesitant. The average monthly cost of a one-bedroom apartment in the notoriously pricey Silicon Valley is more than \$2,400.

"That would be hard to budget for any teacher, much less a Catholic school teacher," McManmon told NCR.

Around the country Catholic schools are struggling to retain and recruit educators, and real estate experts and church leaders say the reasons include escalating housing prices, particularly in coastal states and urban areas.

To help tackle the challenges, a fledgling movement is underway to provide affordable housing to Catholic school instructors. Several U.S. dioceses are considering or have launched initiatives, with early projects focused on revamping the church's extensive and often underutilized real estate.

“The stats don’t lie, however, and you could argue that we’re falling behind in caring for Catholic school teachers.”

— Joseph Womac

McManmon ultimately moved to San Jose and landed what she called “the perfect setup” — a job teaching at St. Martin of Tours School and paying \$1,000 a month for communal housing in a renovated convent at nearby St. John Vianney Parish.

‘A moral obligation’

Multiple reports indicate teacher shortages, which experts say impact public and Catholic schools alike, have worsened in recent years.

There are myriad reasons for the trend, including burnout and relatively low salaries.

“I don’t think housing is the biggest problem, but it’s one aspect of it, and it’s a big point of angst especially for younger teachers,” said Lincoln Snyder, president and CEO of the National Catholic Educational Association.

Fr. Joe Kim, pastor of St. John Vianney, said the steep cost of housing is “very likely the No. 1 challenge” in attracting and retaining young educators in the San Jose Diocese.

As housing costs swell, wages across the workforce haven’t kept pace.

Many public school teachers struggle to afford housing close to where they work, and it can be even more difficult for Catholic educators, who make on average 26% less than their public school counterparts, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

“Catholic school teachers have always earned a relatively modest income, but in most places, a young couple teaching 20 or 30 years ago could still expect to get a house,” Snyder said.

“The stats don’t lie, and you could argue that we’re falling

behind in caring for Catholic school teachers.’

—Joe Womac

A hurdle to paying teachers more, according to Catholic school leaders, is that tuition and salaries are closely linked. In K-8 schools, about 80% of tuition goes toward staff wages, according to Snyder, and schools try to keep instruction costs affordable for working families.

Joseph Womac is president of the Specialty Family Foundation — a nonprofit supporting Catholic education, housing and substance abuse treatment efforts in LA County — and he’s been engaged in national conversations about lower-cost housing for Catholic school teachers.

Womac acknowledged the compensation constraints in Catholic schools. “The stats don’t lie, however, and you could argue that we’re falling behind in caring for Catholic school teachers,” he said.

“We have a moral obligation that comes with our Catholic mission,” said Womac. “We can’t stop at the point of hire and just say, ‘You know, I made this hire, and it’s your job to be here.’”

New life to an old concept

The Catholic Church has housed teachers before, “they just wore habits,” said Benjamin Vasko, Catholic school recruitment specialist for the St. Paul and Minneapolis Archdiocese.

Vasko was speaking at a conference in the fall sponsored by the Church Properties Initiative at the University of Notre Dame’s Fitzgerald Institute for Real Estate. The initiative aims to help the Catholic Church — viewed as the world’s largest non-state landowner — address real estate issues. It recently has become a resource for a growing group of dioceses interested in affordable housing for Catholic school teachers.

Migration to the suburbs, parish consolidations, and fewer people entering the priesthood and religious life have left a sizable quantity of underused and vacant properties, said Maddy Johnson, program manager for the Church Properties Initiative.

Womac said people involved in Catholic



Lincoln Snyder, president and CEO of the National Catholic Educational Association, said “reimagining how we can support people coming into teaching is one of the top priorities for the church.” (Courtesy of National Catholic Educational Association)

education are exploring ways “to be strategic and creative with land holdings so that the church can do more for housing without necessarily having to find a lot of cash to do it.”

In June, the Church Properties Initiative and Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) hosted a summit with Catholic school superintendents, including delegates from St. Paul and Minneapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles and Brooklyn, New York, to discuss ways to use real estate for educators.

In addition to the church’s history of housing men and women religious who staff Catholic schools, for years a number of university-based graduate-degree programs for Catholic school teachers have offered low-cost housing. Examples include ACE and Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PACE Corps) at Loyola Marymount University. Womac said such programs can serve as helpful models for the new projects.

Dioceses are discussing a range of options, including converting unused rectories and convents into intentional communities — a model similar to the graduate-degree programs — and mortgage rebates, the lease or sale of property to subsidize teacher housing, and construction of new affordable housing on church land.

Most initial efforts involve revamped former convents, where the floor plan lends itself to communal living — a lifestyle that’s typically more appealing and practical for young, single people.

Solutions for people with growing families or who are ready for home ownership are more challenging, said education and housing experts, but they hope projects emerge.

Community and lower costs

At St. John Vianney, the bottom floor of its former convent — once home to Presentation sisters who taught parish schoolchildren — contains parish offices, but for years the top floor was “basically a storage unit,” said Kim, the pastor. “I was told that for real estate agents,” wasting that space “was like a mortal sin.”

The building required relatively modest upgrades in order to welcome residents — a kitchen remodel and new fans, flooring, paint and blinds, and a plumbing system inspection.



At St. Alphonsus Parish in Seattle, a convent once home to the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Sisters now houses Catholic school educators. Several U.S. dioceses are considering ways to repurpose their real estate into affordable housing for Catholic school teachers. (Courtesy of the Seattle Archdiocese)



Catholic professionals, including teachers, gather for fellowship in the top story of a former convent in San Jose, California. Communal living and low-cost housing provide the “perfect setup,” said Claire McManmon, who teaches fifth through eighth graders at a nearby Catholic school. (Courtesy of St. John Vianney Parish)

The renovation cost approximately \$300,000 and took three months. Like other recent teacher housing projects, it was financed largely by a foundation.

Johnson, at the Church Properties Initiative, noted that repurposing property can be complicated and, in certain cases, expensive. In deciding how to proceed, owners need to consider many factors, including the building’s structural soundness and its architectural significance.

Inside the converted San Jose convent, a married couple serve as coordinators and live in the former mother superior’s quarters. The 12 residents are a mix of young Catholic professionals and include public as well as Catholic school teachers.

The parish charges \$1,000 a month for what it calls “stewardship,” rather than rent, and will work with residents to lower the amount if needed. Individuals are asked to stay for a year, but the timeline is flexible.

Residents commit to eat and pray together, “not all the time but regularly,” Kim said.

School leaders emphasized that the benefits of an intentional community can further help young educators remain in the career longer.

For McManmon, who taught for two years before moving to San Jose, the ability to interact with other teachers at home “is really helpful for the development and growth of me as an educator.”

“You share ideas or stories and you encourage each other,” she said.

Transforming former convents into “something close to their original purpose by filling them with young, passionate teachers, brings life to a community,” Kim said. “It certainly has for us.”

At least two programs that will include affordable housing strongly emphasize a formation element, including efforts in the St. Paul and Minneapolis and Denver archdioceses. The Colorado initiative seeks to create «mission-aligned teachers” by providing mentoring and formation to recent college graduates.

A project in the Seattle Diocese aims to transition underutilized church spaces into affordable housing for church employees, and the first year focuses on Catholic school educators.

The diocese renovated a convent in Seattle's St. Alphonsus Parish for about \$30,000. Currently there are five residents, who pray and eat together, and each pay \$900 per month. The average monthly rate for a one-bedroom apartment near the parish was approximately \$1,725 in February.

"Our hope is to expand the program to provide the necessary support to teachers in those beginning years when the salary is not commensurate to the rental rates in the area," said Helen McClenahan, chief communication officer for the archdiocese.

Affordable housing for Catholic school teachers based on new construction may emerge first in the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

The Specialty Family Foundation helped establish the Our Lady Queen of Angels Housing Alliance in 2023 — Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez is board chair — to address the housing crisis in part by developing affordable housing on archdiocesan

property. (A California law signed in October aims to give faith organizations the ability to more easily build affordable homes; it likely will mean fewer hurdles for the alliance's work.)

Our Lady Housing's first endeavor is a 100-unit building to house at-risk community college students. But future projects will focus on Catholic school staff.

McManmon, taking a quick morning break from teaching, said it's going to "continue to be difficult to find people who are willing to find the beauty in teaching to be greater than the reality of the costs."

"To have opportunities to obtain affordable housing," she said, "I think will be a key part of having young Catholic educators in our country."

Editor's note: A version of this story appeared in the March 1-14, 2024 print issue under the headline: *Affordable housing for teachers.*

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



Jon Martin, coordinator for residents in the transformed convent at St. John Vianney Parish, leads music in the chapel. He and his wife help organize meals, prayer and social functions. (Courtesy of St. John Vianney Parish)



This is an architect's rendering of the resident entry for the Bridge Housing Campus in Detroit, scheduled to open in May. It features 40 studio apartments, a group dining room, classrooms, barbershop, dental and medical clinics, gym and a nondenominational chapel. (Courtesy of Pope Francis Center)

DETROIT MINISTRY TO OFFER 'DEEPER LEVEL OF CARE AND HEALING' TO HOMELESS PEOPLE



by

**CATHERINE M.
ODELL**

popefranciscenter.org

December 12, 2023

STORY

Forty studio apartments, a group dining room, classrooms, a barbershop, dental and medical clinics, a gym donated by former Detroit Pistons basketball star Vinnie Johnson, a nondenominational chapel, and even a bicycle repair shop.

All this and more will soon welcome Detroit's "hardest to house" people at the city's Bridge Housing Campus. Scheduled to open in May, it is a 60,000 square-foot facility with six interconnected buildings, and is being built on 6 acres in the Core City neighborhood. This transitional housing facility was planned years ago by the Pope Francis Center, a recently renamed 30-year-old ministry to homeless people founded at Sts. Peter and Paul, a Jesuit parish downtown near Detroit's Renaissance Center.

The center envisions residents staying at the new facility as long as three to four months before transitioning to more permanent housing.

The opening of the facility is the realization of a long-held dream of Jesuit Fr. Tim McCabe, the center's president and CEO.

"My heart was already there with folks who were marginalized or folks

“I love(d) a culture of giving respect and nonjudgmental support for homeless people. This honors their human dignity.”

— Joseph Womac

who were dealing with different kinds of illness,” he told NCR. “I loved a culture of giving respect and nonjudgmental support for homeless people. This honors their human dignity.”

McCabe, who grew up in Ferndale, a Detroit suburb, had a late calling to the priesthood and was ordained in 2015. One of his first assignments as a priest was at Sts. Peter and Paul, and that brought him face-to-face with many of the city’s homeless people.

For years, this parish had been offering daytime help to hungry and homeless people through its Warming Center. McCabe eventually suggested the parish rename the Warming Center because that didn’t describe everything it offered. It was renamed the Pope Francis Center and established as a nonprofit.

The center had historically offered access to showers, hot meals and washing machines. Those services will continue as the new Bridge Campus opens.

Even years ago, McCabe and others could see that many homeless people needed much more than a drop-in center for a meal or shower.

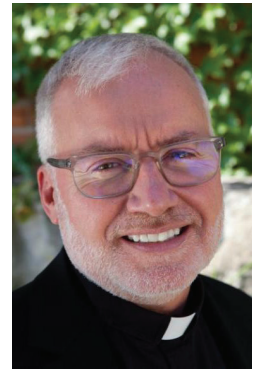
“We were certainly keeping people alive, helping and supporting them. But there was nothing that was

really changing their situations,” McCabe said.

So, with Jesuit encouragement in 2016, he visited 10 American cities to study 25 approaches to homelessness. McCabe wanted to see and study the most effective programs — what really worked best for homeless people.

“There was a place in San Antonio,” he recalled, “that I really liked. It was called Haven for Hope. All the services that homeless people might need were right there — from government offices to detox clinics. They were all on one campus. I also saw things in some programs that I would never do — like housing too many people in one space. An optimal number is about 40. You want to have a sense of community for the homeless.”

McCabe also learned during his investigative tour that homeless people challenged with mental illness are often intimidated by high-rise buildings. He decided that when Detroit’s housing structure was



Jesuit Fr. Tim McCabe is president and CEO of the Bridge Housing Campus in Detroit. (Courtesy of Pope Francis Center)





William Kangas is executive director of the Pope Francis Center in Detroit. (Courtesy of Pope Francis Center)

finally built, it wouldn't have any buildings taller than two stories. At this new space, he particularly hoped to welcome Detroit's "chronically homeless."

William Kangas, the center's executive director, told NCR said that people who have experienced chronic homelessness often "have had a deeper level of complexity and trauma in their lives."

"There needs to be a deeper level of care and healing in these lives," Kangas said. That's

the reason, he said, for a "bridge" facility like the one being built on West Hancock Street. It will offer more time and help to chronically homeless people. Architects have even included an outdoor urban living space for people who are too traumatized to live indoors. This space has heated sidewalks and overhead heaters.

For months, McCabe has been proudly donning a hard hat to lead large and small tours around the Bridge Housing Campus as foundations were poured, buildings framed and a handsome brick and steel structure with large windows took shape.

McCabe said that it had been difficult to raise money for the initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic.

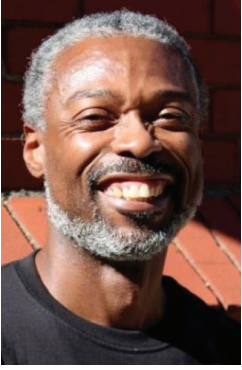
Detroit's own United Auto Workers union and Ford Motor Company had already contributed generously. But, construction cost estimates were going up, and \$14 million was needed to keep the project moving. Out of nowhere, McCabe said he got a phone call from the Julia Burke Foundation, a California family foundation established in memory of their daughter, Julia, who had been killed in a car accident at 16.

At the end of the call, he recalled, the foundation's representative asked, "How about if we give you \$7 million?" A few years later, the group gave another \$6 million to help complete the Bridge Housing Campus.

With the expected opening of the campus just a few months away, McCabe is quick to say that many



Jesuit Fr. Tim McCabe talks with a visitor to the Pope Francis Center in Detroit. The center will open its Bridge Housing Campus in May. Residents are expected to stay at the new facility as long as three to four months before transitioning to more permanent housing. (Courtesy of Pope Francis Center)



Jamil Allen is program manager at the Bridge Housing Campus in Detroit. (Courtesy of Pope Francis Center)

“miracles” that have kept this ministry alive have come through people — those who work at the Pope Francis Center, or through volunteers. The diversity of his center’s staff, he believes, is one of those great gifts.

“I have Catholics, Protestants and also agnostics with a passion for this ministry,” he said. “I also have people who are in recovery from substance abuse or were incarcerated. All of those human experiences have led to an empathy and compassion

in them for our approach to those who experience homelessness.”

Jamil Allen, for instance, the center’s program manager, guides homeless people toward helping agencies, therapists or educational programs. In a 2023 YouTube post for Safe and Just Michigan, Allen

frankly shared the dramatic and tragic story of his impoverished childhood, family violence and eventual involvement in a gang on the lower East side of Detroit.

Allen spent 33 years in prison after being convicted of murder at 17 in 1987. But, as he said in his YouTube video, the mentoring he received from another young prisoner changed him profoundly. It gave him something new to live for. So, he educated himself in prison and was released in 2018.

“Now, I’m a companion, mentor and servant for others. I believe that my purpose here on this earth is to serve and make life better for the next generation to come. I do that,” he said in the last sentence of his testimonial, “at the Pope Francis Center.”

This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.



A guest receives lunch from the Feed My Poor food truck in MacArthur Park, just west of downtown Los Angeles. The truck, started as a ministry of Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills, serves meals to areas in Venice, Santa Monica, Westwood and Hollywood where many people are experiencing homelessness. (Tom Hoffarth)

IN LA, CATHOLIC-RUN 'FEED MY POOR' FOOD TRUCK SERVES MEALS, HOPE

by
TOM HOFFARTH

February 12, 2024

STORY

A line of mostly Latino men and women stood some-30 deep on the sidewalk along a very busy stretch of Wilshire Boulevard when a bright yellow food truck pulled up next to the iconic MacArthur Park, just west of the downtown Los Angeles skyscrapers.

The bold blue letters on all sides of the truck were well known: Feed My Poor. So was the fact it parked at this spot every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at noontime.

This park has been in the news for its contribution to LA's fentanyl epidemic. Across the street stands an array of makeshift tarps and shelters. A group of men rolls dice on the sidewalk near a white SUV offering community health care. Loud music comes from a parked car.

Fr. Ed Benioff, pastor at Church of the Good Shepherd eight miles away in Beverly Hills, first greeted the security guard whose car was parked, saving the spot for the food truck. Then came hugs for two women who emerged from the vehicle.

Marisol Ortiz Perez joined her sister-in-law, Araceli Orta, on this trip. As part of a three-woman rotation that includes Perez's sister, Adriana Ortiz, they have

“There are days we cry with them, but I know the mercy of God is coming to these people.”

— *Marisol Ortiz Perez*

staffed the truck full time since the program started in July 2021. Seven days a week, they coordinate food preparation in the mornings, drive to various locations to distribute some 300 hot meals over three hours, then drive back to Sun Valley.

The women lined up individual Styrofoam containers, scooped up yellow rice and topped it with mole de pollo (chicken in a spicy red sauce) that had been warming on the stove. Then they added salad and a bag of fruit from the refrigerator, and topped it off with a cheese bagel that had been warmed on the grill.

Unlike other food trucks that buzz through the city to service the lunch crowds, this one does not charge its guests.

When Benioff started the nonprofit organization Feed My Poor in 2020 at the start of the pandemic, the idea was to gather a few volunteers to assemble ham and cheese sandwiches that they could give out in the neighborhood.

But it became obvious: Beverly Hills isn't really a prime area where people experiencing homelessness tend to gravitate. A 2022 count tallied only 27 unhoused people in the community, and most neighbors know them by name and know their medication needs.

“I just noticed how with everyone locked down and hoarding food and toilet paper, and everyone in shutdown mode, the homeless were being neglected,” said Benioff, a Southern California native born in Hollywood who has been at Good Shepherd for nine years. “It may sound gross, but since the restaurants around town weren't operating, they weren't throwing food away that those in need could even access.”

Benioff thought back to the time in his early 20s, when he was going through the RCIA program to convert to Catholicism, when he spent a year with the Missionaries of Charity Brothers serving the poor in downtown LA. The organization, founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, adhered to the spirit of Matthew 25 and the philosophy to go out and meet people where they are.

where they can come to you,” Benioff said of local church parishes. “We needed to find them.”

Making 600 sandwiches a day, seven days a week, the Good Shepherd community networked with neighboring faith communities — All Saints' Episcopal Church, Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church and Sinai Temple Los Angeles — to distribute them.

After nine months, Benioff took the bigger leap of faith.

In March 2021, he observed the growing army of food trucks that navigated city streets during the pandemic to take meals directly to customers. Why not mirror that process and bring healthful options to people experiencing food insecurity?

Benioff's due diligence led him to decide that leasing a food truck for about \$3,000 a month was better than trying to buy one that would adhere to strict LA County requirements regarding food prep on a common lot, in addition to needing workers to decrease, maintain and undergo health inspections.

Factoring in a full-time paid staff, resourcing food in addition to what a local food bank donated, and the rising price of gas, the cost jumped to about \$40,000 a month.

The 2,100 hot meals distributed each week cost



Fr. Ed Benioff, pastor at Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills, started Feed My Poor in 2020 at the start of the pandemic. (Tom Hoffarth)



Marisol Ortiz Perez, right, and Araceli Orta prepare meals Feed My Poor distributes to unhoused people near LA's MacArthur Park. The nonprofit distributes about 300 meals there on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. (Tom Hoffarth)

about \$5 each.

Benioff's simple requests for financial support from his parishioners, as well as many around town who see the yellow truck and contact them for more information, has allowed the program to remain uninterrupted for four years.

"I admit, if I'm not in Beverly Hills, this may not happen," said Benioff. "For a food truck, relying on volunteers is too demanding, and you need accountability and responsibility to make this work. We also go to some very tough places and we don't want to put anyone in harm's way."

The outreach has evolved into two phases: A sandwich making crew still produces about 400 a day and delivers them by van to regular stops in Venice, Santa Monica, Westwood and Hollywood, areas with many people experiencing homelessness. That happens Monday through Saturday.

In addition to its three days at MacArthur Park, the food truck spends four days between two spots on LA's Skid Row, both very close to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker Hospitality Kitchen. Feed The Poor outreach essentially fills in the days that LACW's hot meal kitchen is closed.

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Matthew Elshoff, a Capuchin friar appointed as episcopal vicar to the Our Lady of the Angels Region of the archdiocese in July 2023, saw how various organizations ran successful food outreach programs in the neighborhood near the Watts-based St. Lawrence of Brindisi Catholic Church, where he was the pastor for five years.

As Elshoff went up and down the line at MacArthur Park greeting people headed to the food truck, he said he had an even more profound appreciation of just being present.

"People here might be seeking political asylum, or they're displaced from their homes in another city nearby," said Elshoff. "The complexity and challenges they have in their lives gives me a sense of why we should be here with them — take this outreach to them. Talking and listening gives them a sense of dignity, a moment of hope, not feel loneliness."

Elsoff noted an “urgency” to such programs. “What Father Ed is doing may connect with other outreach programs we have at other parishes,” he said. “We can network because we are stronger when we’re working together.”

Marisol Ortiz Perez’s connection to this program became personal. She and her four children experienced homelessness, and it wasn’t until her youngest was one week old that she finally found permanent shelter, she said. She and her children, now ages 21, 16, 12 and 8, live in Sylmar and attend St. Didacus Catholic Church.

“I was just a street seller of tamales when Fr. Ed brought me into this,” said Ortiz Perez. “It’s my turn to serve my brothers and sisters. God works in mysterious ways and I feel we are like this one little piece of rice that can provide. I’ve seen miracles happen.”

Ortiz Perez says she is touched when a guest affectionately refers to her as *mija* (“my daughter”).

“I feel like a mother to them, and they inspire me,” said Ortiz Perez, who focuses on cooking and planning meals like chicken soup, pasta dishes or Lenten beans. “There are days we cry with them, but I know the mercy of God is coming to these people. We are just the instruments.”

Sister-in-law Araceli Orta, who loads the truck and hands out the meals at the window, will see a familiar face and exclaim: “Good morning, papa!”

“I think I get most emotional when I see people with little children here,” said Orta, who also has four children of her own. “That’s really when it gets hard. Otherwise, I never tire of doing this. I love it.”

Benioff marvels at how his Good Shepherd Catholic community, with about 1,300 parishioners, makes an impact in a neighborhood with a largely Jewish demographic. Good Shepherd was once known as the “Hollywood Catholic” church, where actors such as Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Rudolph Valentino frequented. Actor Mark Wahlberg is one of the Feed My Poor program’s current supporters.

“They’ve been the saints for this,” Benioff said. “They’ve answered a lot of prayers.”

Benioff understands this food truck program isn’t for everyone, but it’s part of what he called “a Christian



LA Auxiliary Bishop Matthew Elshoff talks with guests waiting for Feed My Poor’s meals. Elshoff, a Capuchin friar, said the ministry provides people “a sense of dignity, a moment of hope.” (Tom Hoffarth)



Makeshift tarps and shelters line the street near MacArthur Park, where Feed My Poor's food truck parks three days a week. The park has been described as contributing to LA's fentanyl epidemic. (Tom Hoffarth)

challenge not to be desensitized to this." He recommends that pastors can build an outreach ministry to the unhoused start with collecting donations for bread, cold cuts and bottled water. If they lack volunteers, they can donate money to Feed My Poor.

"I feel like I'm a surfer on a wave and will just keep riding this," Benioff said. "I'm just the loudmouth for it. It's God's thing, not mine."

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APPENDIX 1: FEATURED MINISTRIES AND PROGRAMS

- **Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program** in Boston, Massachusetts (bhchp.org) Ensures unconditionally equitable and dignified access to the highest quality health care for all individuals and families experiencing homelessness in our community.
- **Bridge Housing Campus at the Pope Francis Center** in Detroit, Michigan (popefranciscenter.org/donate/bridge-housing-campus) The 40-unit campus serves the unique needs of the chronically homeless by providing guests with 90 – 120 days of shelter, along with intensive medical, respite, psychological, addiction, social and job-readiness services.
- **Cabrini Teaching Fellows Program** in Denver, Colorado (cabriniteachingfellows.com) Among other things, the Cabrini Teaching Fellows Program offers direct access to low-cost housing and an active community life to surround young teachers with the Christian community.
- **Catholic Housing Communities by Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington** in Spokane, Washington (housing.cceasternwa.org) Offering 2600 units, Catholic Housing Ventures creates sustainable communities through excellence in development, operations, and community partnerships.
- **Driftwood Housing** in Mobile, Alabama (driftwoodhousing.org) Provides affordable housing for the chronically homeless where they receive services in a safe environment.
- **Father McKenna Center** in Washington, D.C. (fathermckennacenter.org) Care for families struggling with food insecurity and men experiencing homelessness by providing food, shelter, clothing and services to support their journey towards stability and productivity.
- **Feeding America** (feedingamerica.org) A nationwide network of food banks, food pantries, and meal programs that provide resources so people facing hunger can put food on the table.
- **Feed My Poor at Good Shepherd Catholic Church** in Los Angeles, California (gsbh.org/fmp) A food truck serving hot, healthy meals to the forgotten and neglected living in large encampments in different cities around Los Angeles.
- **Food Bank of the Southern Tier** area in New York (foodbankst.org) Working together to build and sustain hunger-free communities throughout the Southern Tier.
- **Haven for Hope** in San Antonio, Texas (havenforhope.org) With an approach that is person-centered, trauma-informed and recovery-oriented, Haven for Hope and their partners assist individuals experiencing homelessness by providing, coordinating, and delivering an efficient system of care.
- **Healthy Housing Initiative**, Catholic Charities USA (catholiccharitiesusa.org/healthy-housing-initiative) A person-centered, comprehensive approach to address chronic homelessness through permanent supportive housing and social services, in collaboration with Catholic health care. The five-year program has been piloted in Detroit, Las Vegas, Portland (Oregon), St. Louis and Spokane.
- **Hippie Kitchen** in Los Angeles, California (lacatholicworker.org) A free soup kitchen that serves more than 3,000 hot meals each week operated by the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. LACW also operates a service center that provides dental care, foot care, toiletries, shopping carts, and mail service for the unhoused.
- **Innovative Housing Program** in Seattle, Washington (mycatholicsschool.org/innovative-housing-project) Provides affordable housing to those serving the church.
- **Lazarus Ministry at St. Anthony's Shrine** in Boston, Massachusetts (stanthonyshrine.org/ministries/lazarus-ministry) St. Anthony Shrine provides burials for the homeless and those who die alone and with no known next-of-kin.
- **Miriam's Kitchen** in Washington, D.C. (miriamskitchen.org) Guests are engaged through healthy, made-from-scratch meals, and connected with personalized social services that assist them with rebuilding their lives. Beyond the intensive program offering, Miriam's Kitchen regularly engages community leaders and elected officials who fiercely advocate on their guests' behalf.

- **Motels4Now** in South Bend, Indiana (www.olrsb.org/motels4now) Motels4Now is a housing-first program that houses the chronically homeless in dignity, and helps many move into more long-term, month-to-month housing.
- **Our Lady Housing** in Los Angeles, California (ourladyhousing.org) In partnership with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Our Lady Housing offers affordable housing options tailored for Catholic educators, staff, administrative personnel, and the wider local community within Greater Los Angeles.
- **Our Lady of the Road** in South Bend, Indiana (olrsb.org) In addition to Motels4Now, Our Lady of the road is involved in multiple efforts to assist those who are experiencing homelessness.
- **Pathways to Housing DC** in Washington, D.C. (pathwaystohousingdc.org) End homelessness and support recovery for people with complex health challenges by offering Housing First options, direct street outreach, an urgent care clinic, and assistance with finding gainful employment.
- **Pope Francis Center** in Detroit, Michigan (popefranciscenter.org) Provides meals, supportive services, crisis response, and housing assistance to Detroit community members in need, especially those experiencing homelessness.
- **Second Harvest Food Bank** in Louisiana (no-hunger.org) Getting food and assistance to those in need.
- **ShelterBox USA** (shelterboxusa.org) Builds awareness of global displacement and facilitates providing shelter, tools, and supplies that will enable them to rebuild their homes and transform their lives after disaster.
- **St. Charles Borromeo Holy Family Service Center** in North Hollywood, California (stcharlesborromeochurch.org/holy-family-service-center) Eligible clients receive free food, clothing, toiletries, books, toys, furniture, and other household items. Hot showers and haircuts are provided. Pregnant women are provided layettes and other available infant care items.
- **St. Francis Friends of the Poor** in New York, New York (stfrancisfriends.org/mission-vision) Offers permanent supportive housing services to homeless men and women with histories of chronic mental illness.
- **St. Francis House** in Boston, Massachusetts (stfrancishouse.org) Through a continuum of internally and externally integrated programs and services that focus on the whole individual, guests achieve stability in three key areas: housing, income, and behavioral health.
- **Terre Haute Catholic Charities Foodbank** in Terre Haute, Indiana (ccthin.org) By collaborating with community partners, Terre Haute Catholic Charities Foodbank provides nutritious food, safe shelter, quality youth programming and essential human and household needs to their neighbors.
- **Wednesday Night Supper Club** in Boston, Massachusetts (facebook.com/wednesdaynightsupperclub) A community of people who come together to share hot, nutritious meals to those experiencing homelessness.
- **Women's Clinic at St. Anthony's Shrine** in Boston, Massachusetts (stanthonyshrine.org/womens-clinic) Serves the complex health care needs of homeless women in downtown Boston in a safe, calming, confidential and private environment, separate from any male presence.

BOOKS REVIEWED:

- *Rough Sleepers: Dr. Jim O'Connell's Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People*, Tracy Kidder. Random House (January 17, 2023)
- *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (June 3, 2008)

APPENDIX 2: STATISTICS

Point-in-time estimates of homelessness, The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, December 2023

- On a single night in 2023, roughly 653,100 people – or about 20 of every 10,000 people in the United States – were experiencing homelessness.
- Between 2022 and 2023, the number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 12%, or roughly 70,650 more people.
- Homelessness among persons in families with children rose by 16%.
- The largest numerical increase in people experiencing homelessness was among people who identify as Hispanic or Latin(a)(o)(x), increasing by 28% or 39,106 people between 2022 and 2023.

Toward a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness, University of California San Francisco, June 2023

- A study of homelessness in California, which has a disproportionate percentage of the U.S. homeless population, found that 24% of participants noted they could not find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability.

Mortality among the homeless: Causes and meteorological relationships, National Library of Medicine: The National Center for Biotechnology Information, December 21, 2017

- The average life span of a homeless person was shorter by about 17.5 years than that recorded for the general population.
- Deaths caused by hypothermia were thirteen-fold more frequently recorded among the homeless than for the general population.

American Society on Aging: Generations Journal, Summer 2020

- Among single homeless adults, approximately half are ages 50 and older. Of these, almost half first became homeless after age 50.
- Adults ages 50 and older who are homeless are experiencing health conditions 20 years earlier than their housed counterparts.

Home prices are rising faster than wages, USAFacts.org, published April 11, 2023

- According to the Federal Finance Housing Agency, home prices rose 74% from 2010 to 2022. The average wage rose 54% during the same time.
- Home prices accelerated faster than wages during the pandemic in nearly every county in the United States.
- In most of the western US and almost every predominantly urban county, a single average earner couldn't afford to buy a median-priced home in their county in 2022. One in nine Americans lives in a county where two average earners could not afford the median home.

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