Understanding Homelessness

During my seminary studies at Candler School of Theology, I served as the summer chaplain at Crossroad Community Ministries. There I learned about the issue of homelessness; its causes, the impact is has on individuals and families, and strategies to assist people out of homelessness. In my work with Crossroads (followed by my work as Curate at Church of the Common Ground), I learned that there is no single reason for homelessness. There is no cut and dry solution. In my conversations with dozens of people experiencing homelessness, I have learned a great deal about what leads people to not having shelter.

Possible Reasons for Homelessness

- **Leaving Home**: Some teens may leave home because of parental drug use and/or abuse or child drug use. Others face discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Loss of Home**: Many people cannot afford their mortgage or rent and they don't have anyone to stay with. In turn, they end up at shelters.
- **Foster Care**: The first person I sat down with at Crossroads was a young woman (19) who had aged out of the foster care system. She had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and had paid for one semester of college. However, it was summer break and without the dorm she had no shelter. Although she was working and going to school, she knew she would not be able to afford another year of school. When I met her she was working at McDonald's and living at the (now closed) Peachtree-Pine shelter.
- **Drug Addiction and/or Mental Illness**: Many people who are addicted to drugs leave their homes in search of drugs. There are many who have mental illnesses that have no place to go. Many are released from the hospital without support.
- **Lack of Employment**: Most families are living pay check to pay check and do not have much money saved. Loss of a job can easily lead to being unsheltered.
- **The Penal System**: There are very few programs to support people when they are released from prison. As a result, people are released and then held responsible for paying bills and fees associated with their incarceration. Without any family or support from friends, homelessness will often be the result.

What We Can Do

We have to take a holistic approach to the problem. We must understand the reasons for homelessness. Yes, we should offer people temporary shelter, food, clothing, and medical care. However, they also need long-term solutions, particularly housing. I am an advocate of the Housing First model. In this model you must first connect with people experiencing homelessness. Next, a social worker or other professional commits to working with the individual to identify and take advantage of resources. The professional must walk alongside the individual in everything.

It is not enough for us to secure housing for an unsheltered person. They must also be able to receive wraparound services such as mental health counseling, addiction support such as AA or NA, job search guidance, vocational training, and medical care. Without this stability, it is nearly impossible to obtain and keep a job, or to be mentally and physically healthy. The goal is always long-term healing, not just a band-aid.

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