

# **Report on the Community Conversations on Homelessness in Washington**

Sponsored by *Washington Public Library* and the *City of Washington Community Relations Board*.

Six Community Conversations on Homelessness took place in the last week of September and first week of October. 40 people participated. The Library Director and members of the Community Relations Board facilitated the conversations. The summary and detailed report below represent the opinions of the people who attended the Conversations. We want to thank the volunteers who helped with the conversations, as well as everyone who participated.

## **Summary:**

The homelessness discussion had several levels:

1. Chronic homelessness, individuals living for a year or more without shelter.
2. Temporary homelessness, individuals and families living without shelter for days or months
3. People living under threat of becoming homeless themselves, who do not have sufficient income to meet their needs, who live in fear of small financial difficulties that could cause them to lose their housing.

The community is already engaged in an informal conversation on homelessness in homes and community gatherings around Washington. There is a general perception that it is a growing problem. People are surprised at the prominence of homelessness in rural areas. People feel a sense of compassion, anger and frustration at the situation. People feel Washington does not have an adequate system to help, and there are questions about whether the community has the capacity and expertise to effectively expand their services.

Some question whether the community will to help is strong enough, as some people believe the homeless should leave town. People are thankful for the various services for the poor and homeless that already exist in Washington, but feel Washington could benefit from a more unified approach. People are confused about what programs and services are offered. There is a feeling that, because homelessness is being addressed in other counties and cities, Washington might be able to make use of these other service models and experiences.

**At least one homeless high school student found shelter as a result of these conversations.** A community member with an extra room volunteered to house the student so they could finish high school. That student now has a room and a roof over their head.

## **The Conversations**

For our sessions, facilitators asked three questions.

1. How do you feel when you see a homeless person?
2. What is your personal experience, positive or negative, with individuals with homelessness?
3. What opportunities or challenges do you see?

People reported feeling uncomfortable at seeing homeless people in the community – which encompassed feeling overwhelmed, perplexed, concerned, angry, guilty and other feelings. People also reported feeling empathetic and compassionate, frustrated at the situation, feeling helpless to provide meaningful assistance, sad at the situation, and in general wanting to provide help. Some expressed fear, both for their own safety and the safety of the homeless individuals.

People came to the conversations with a variety of experiences with homelessness. This included working in an ER unit, experiencing homelessness themselves, working or volunteering with homeless services, growing up in poverty, teaching students who were homeless, working at a food pantry, working with the public and seeing homelessness, or curious about the conversations. On an individual basis, most people discussed the importance of moving past fear and discomfort to talk with the homeless. Importance was attached to treating people with dignity. Many people are a few steps away from homelessness itself. A couple people reported that the homeless in the area like the town, feel safe here, and prefer this over a big city. Some homeless cannot or will not accept help, either out of distrust, mental health problems, or even because they find a certain freedom.

There was some general confusion, that can be generalized into the lack of a central point of contact. Where can people go to get clean? Are food pantries meeting the current needs of the community? Who in Washington is responsible on a day-to-day basis? What services are actually available? Is there a central point of contact? Is there another Town with a working model that that Washington can look at? How do we fix it when shelters are hard to build?

On a systematic level, there was agreement that the community has strengths, but there is a need for improvement. People acknowledged some strengths in the local community, described as a “very giving community.” Washington has Food Pantries, the weekly Harvest Table Meal, various Church Crisis Funds, Mercy’s overnight warming/cooling shelter that operates during inclement weather and the Homeless Task Force. People cited the

overwhelming community response to shelter needs last winter as a reason for hope that the community could address homelessness.

People mentioned many areas for improvement. When someone without a home is sent to the ER, there is nowhere to refer them when they are released. In addition, there are not good mental health resources to help. Gaps in the foster system lead kids into adulthood without much-needed, adequate support; people noted that children with stable families often receive family support until well into adulthood. Keeping pantries filled is a challenge. Although the rules are to take only what you need, some people's needs are great. They may have children or multiple adults to feed. There is also suspicion that some people are taking advantage of the system.

One of the biggest challenges for the homeless is incorrect paperwork. They lose their State ID, birth certificates get stolen or lost, and they struggle to replace them. ID is needed to get a job, or access services. Without a permanent address or ability to navigate the paperwork request systems, they can't get paperwork mailed to them. There is nowhere to send them to help work these paperwork struggles.

Lots of people noted that there is no paid position to coordinate services. There is no single point-of-entry with a vetting process where services are coordinated. A lack of effective coordination was noted many times.

There is no shelter available, and a fear that the short-term Mercy shelter program for inclement weather may not be available this winter. Individuals may attempt to get themselves admitted to the hospital with an invented/exaggerated medical problem just to have shelter. Frustration was expressed over the city zoning process that zoned shelters to an Industrial Park. Someone even questioned whether this was in compliance with Federal regulations. This was lumped together with a general Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) attitude. Some people who expressed a need to help the homeless admit they don't want a homeless shelter near their house.

Without housing, homeless individuals can't learn basic life and finance skills, like using a checking account, or search for and accept many jobs. Transportation is also an issue. There is no public transportation available, which affects people experiencing homelessness and families/individuals in poverty.

Lastly, there was worry among some that building a better homeless service system could attract more homeless to the area. One person felt there was too much conflict to bring any proposal that involved tax money.

Housing in Washington makes it prohibitively expensive for families. There is not a lot of affordable housing, which makes it hard on families living in poverty.

## Opportunities

These are opportunities participants suggested:

- Increased Church engagement and cooperation to provide homeless shelter and food. Taking ownership collectively – the chambers, schools and parishes.
- Building a homeless shelter somewhere, although everyone noted the difficulties with this option. There is no plan for how to operate the shelter that encompasses such things as rules of use, funding, organization structure, budget, and volunteers. “Putting the cart before the horse,” is how one person described it.
- Need a central resource to coordinate resources.
- Homeless task force is working on starting a non-profit to address homelessness and help is needed. They meet on the first Tuesday of the month at the Family Rescue Center at 10 am.
- We are not alone—let’s replicate the ideas of other cities with working systems of other places
- In St. Charles, organizations meet regularly to coordinate services. There is a Tri-County Continuum of Care, formed in 2004, that encompasses St. Charles, Lincoln & Warren Counties. They have a coordinated entry. Franklin County isn’t involved, but could be. This City/County “doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel.” The participant felt it would be good to get some people invited to the monthly Tri-county meetings to see how we could benefit and what we can learn.
- One participant emphasized that there is not enough practical experience with homelessness without engaging with neighboring counties.