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MOVING FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE IN OUR WORK TO END HOMELESSNESS

Rosanne Haggerty

In 2000, a woman I deeply admired, an educator and historian of reform movements, asked me why organizations working on homelessness were doing such a poor job of ending it.

It was a startling question. Like most in our field, I was accustomed to affirmation for even working on the problem. The way such conversations usually went, I would describe the success of our organization's permanent supportive housing programs, our accomplishment in ending the homelessness of our tenants, and the cost effectiveness of our housing over endless temporary responses to homelessness (Breaking Ground, n.d.). Those listening would, reliably, be impressed that we were doing something that worked.

But this lightning bolt of a question implied we were using the wrong measure and that ending homelessness, not operating good programs was what ultimately mattered. This challenged fundamental things. As I sat there, considering how to respond, I thought about the story of success that defined our organization's work, and my own stake in that story being real, the pride and sense of personal meaning. If the job was actually to end homelessness, that changed everything, because against that standard we and every other organization, government agency, every community were failing. At that moment, despite earnest efforts, effective individual programs and significant money spent over many years, there was no end to homelessness in sight and little to suggest that doing more of what all of

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us were doing would change that. As unsettled as I felt, it struck me that the uncomfortable question was a gift.

I suspect that in every community now rigorously measuring its progress toward ending homelessness, leaders there have a similar

conversion story to tell. I've heard accounts from a number of colleagues of the moment they acknowledged the failure of existing approaches and their community decided to change course.

With a growing list of cities, regions-even countries-now reducing and ending forms of homelessness¹ the key questions in our field have changed. If the familiar questions have been about resources and policy, the

new ones are about purpose, and transformation. Is our purpose to run good programs or to end homelessness? If it's to end homelessness, are we willing to hold our organizations and communities to that standard?

Each of us working in the field will have had encounters with particular people experiencing homelessness that affected us deeply, or perhaps we experienced homelessness ourselves. Empathy born in these moments motivates our work. And yet, something even bigger is at stake for our communities. Homelessness, in its raw visibility, confronts our shared beliefs about right and wrong, fairness, care, protection of the vulnerable, the importance of strong community bonds and the dignity of each person. Our beliefs about our communities and ourselves are on the line.

What would it take to end homelessness—to make it an experience that rarely happens, and when it does, is quickly resolved with the right help so that it doesn't happen again? Many sectors have figured out similar challenges and developed systems and tools for getting the right thing to the right people at the right time; preventing problems in the first place; having the right information to show whether efforts are on track and where improvement is needed; creating cultures of shared accountability for achieving, day after day, the desired result. These sectors have found ways to systematize their values and turn them into reliable solutions for everyone.

The work of ending homelessness is evolving in this way.

At a high level, responses to contemporary homelessness have moved through four stages since the issue became visible in the late 1970s in the United States and other countries. Yet awareness of what's working is uneven, and adoption of successful practices has been slow. This paper reviews the critical stages of this evolution, insights drawn from our experience as we recognized the limits of successive strategies, and what can guide the work ahead toward ending homelessness.

FIRST GENERATION: EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Most people involved with homelessness have spent time working or volunteering at a shelter, soup kitchen, or some other project providing emergency relief. I have worked in the field long enough to recall that in the early days of rising homelessness, we imagined that these short term measures were real solutions, and in fact, for some they were. For those who had networks of family or friends, a plan, a job- something to connect to after a crisis, the temporary help on offer was well matched to their temporary crisis.

Yet for others, there was nothing temporary about their housing crisis, and no discernable options for them on the other side of it. A one-size-fits-all emergency response to homelessness was bound to serve these more isolated individuals badly. These

individuals tended to remain in a holding pattern, living in temporary shelters or on the street, in and out of hospitals as their health or mental health broke down, reliant on food programs, bathing facilities and other emergency assistance programs that helped them survive but were not designed to end their homelessness.

This disconnect was evident in my first encounters with those experiencing homelessness—at the shelter for young people in New York City where I worked in the early 1980s part of a year long volunteer program, and at a shelter for homeless women where I was an overnight monitor one night a week during that year. Homelessness was still a “new” issue then, and the Church and other faith groups were the first responders. Both projects I worked at were sponsored by Catholic organizations, and the majority of the volunteers in both places were Catholic, explicitly drawn to help by the social justice teachings of the Church. The youth shelter attracted ample resources from a largely Catholic base of supporters who responded to a monthly newsletter/funding appeal from the organization. The woman's shelter occupied the basement of a Catholic church.

Yet the gap between our good intentions and our effectiveness was evident. The youth shelter rules allowed each young person a 30-day stay. I learned quickly that the great majority of young people I worked with did not have 30-day problems. Most had left school, had no training or work experience, and were from families overwhelmed by poverty with limited capacity to help. Focused on operating a large shelter, we had few relationships in place outside the shelter with landlords, employers or others who could help young people succeed after leaving our program. Discharged from our shelter after 30-days, no one was surprised when most young people returned 30-days later, their situation unchanged, for another 30-day stay, in an ongoing cycle.

The pattern was similar at the women's shelter. Arriving exhausted by school bus late in the evening, the women had mustered hours earlier at a city facility where they would be assigned to a shelter for the night. Those who still had

the energy to talk would ask me where to go to find housing or a job. My training as a volunteer consisted of basic first aid, how to turn on the coffee and where to put away the cots in the morning. I had none of the information the women needed to escape homelessness and in trying to piece it together between my weekly shifts, I found that none of the city agencies or other programs I called had clear instructions either. Information and referral numbers led to other information and referral numbers, instructions on places to go to schedule appointments and the forms and documents that would be required. It was mind-numbing. I tried to imagine how one of the teenage boys at the youth shelter, or an exhausted woman from the overnight shelter, could ever thread their way through this bureaucracy.

Had we then understood the significance of this gap, the course of homelessness might have unfolded very differently since. Responding to the immediate needs of those experiencing homelessness consumed our focus, energy and resources. Our organizations paid little attention to creating clear exit paths from homelessness- what the young people and women I encountered were seeking. This imbalance can compound over time, when emergency services are institutionalized and become an end in themselves. Witness New York City, which now spends over two billion dollars annually on a vast municipal shelter system, while the number of those experiencing homelessness has never been higher.²

SECOND GENERATION: INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS FOCUS

With homelessness increasing, the inadequacy of emergency responses alone began to spur innovations in housing.

Social and economic upheaval have often catalyzed new housing forms and arrangements.

Industrialization led to tenements, and the inadequacy of tenements led to housing quality codes, the garden city movement and other correctives. Mass migration to cities led to YMCA residences, foyers, residential hotels and lodging houses to accommodate single people getting their start. Boarding homes and shared arrangements have met housing needs wherever housing costs and incomes have been mismatched.

The rise of homelessness in the late 20th century can be traced to the same confluence of economic and social forces that disrupted communities

and institutions and that are now playing out vividly in our national and global politics. The emergence of homelessness can be seen in retrospect as an early indicator of these fractures, and remains a powerful measure of how well our communities are functioning. Levels of homelessness are a bellwether for racial and economic disparities and also reflect the consequences of specific policy decisions.

Among the most significant of these decisions was deinstitutionalization, which freed those with mental illnesses to live in communities with a network of support. Yet the institutions were closed before the homes and the promised infrastructure of community support was built. This meant individuals who had been in institutions were discharged to fend for themselves, and that those with chronic health and mental health challenges who in previous generations would have been cared for in institutions were also left without a place to live and essential care. Mass incarceration also plays out in homelessness, creating huge barriers to employment and housing for mostly African-American citizens returning from prison. Government financial support for new affordable housing, which had been extensive after the Second World War, faded. And the unintended consequence of laws aimed at eliminating rather than improving types of housing deemed substandard-single room occupancy

"With homelessness increasing, the inadequacy of emergency responses alone began to spur innovations in housing."

hotels, lodging houses, boarding homes-was the intentional loss of the very types of low cost housing most sought after by single adults facing homelessness.

The first real solutions to homelessness therefore focused on housing. Permanent supportive housing combined small apartments with affordable rents and on site support workers to assist residents with health and mental health challenges.

This innovation proved to be an important solution for communities as well as those experiencing homelessness. Many of the early projects I worked on involved converting long vacant Catholic schools, convents and orphanages into attractive “single room occupancy” apartments with spaces for communal activities and offices for social workers. Run down hotels, former YMCA residences and other neglected or troubled properties became neighborhood assets again as permanent supportive housing. Across many projects and thousands of apartments we learned what made for a successful environment for residents and prevented a return to homelessness: good design, a diverse group of residents including the working poor as well as those coming from homelessness; attentive on-site property management; having support services well-matched to the needs and aspirations of residents; deep involvement with neighborhood issues; having mission-oriented staff who modeled community-oriented values. Permanent supportive housing also proved to be very cost effective, far less expensive to operate than shelters and other emergency services.

Two other housing innovations, “housing first” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d., a) and “rapid rehousing” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d., b), cut through misguided practices established in the emergency response stage. Housing first as a principle meant starting with the offer of a stable home, without the requirement of treatment or sobriety first. As a practice it meant coupling a rent subsidy with a visiting worker or team of workers who would assist a formerly homeless tenant in maintaining

their home and connecting with needed treatment. Upwards of 75% of participants in housing first programs succeed in leaving homelessness behind permanently (Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae, 2004). Initially “housing first” programs focused on those with serious mental illnesses, but the efficacy of starting with housing, not treatment programs as a way to help individuals to exit homelessness proved applicable to everyone.

The success of the housing first approach was followed by a derivative innovation, “rapid rehousing”. Rapid rehousing programs use the housing first principle, and focus on removing the financial barriers to exiting homelessness for moderately vulnerable individuals and families by providing a time limited rent subsidy.

Importantly, housing first and rapid rehousing approaches exposed a bias in the dominant emergency response mindset, which had pathologized homelessness and turned a home into a prize to be rewarded to those who completed treatment programs, remained sober or reliably took their medications, rather than a foundational resource and basic right.

All three of these housing models were independently evaluated and found to be successful in ending homelessness for those they assisted. Nevertheless, homelessness continued to rise, as did spending on emergency responses, even in New York City, the place where permanent supportive housing and housing first had originated and were well known. Moreover, increasing numbers of individuals were living on the street in the neighborhoods surrounding our buildings.

This was a different type of gap than having extensive emergency responses without sufficient attention to solutions. This gap was between having solutions and spreading them to all who needed them.

THIRD GENERATION: TIME-BOUND COORDINATED CAMPAIGNS

The challenge of spreading what works is not unique to homelessness. In a masterly *New Yorker*

article, surgeon-writer Atul Gawande (2013, July 29) probed the question of why some life saving innovations in healthcare were quickly adopted and others resisted. “Slow ideas”, the ones that can transform the conditions of life, especially for the poor, tend not to be flashy but to require a change of norms and in the way people work together. They require careful, repetitive attention to seemingly small tasks (eg: wash your hands!) to take hold. Spreading them is a social process, of leaders modeling new norms, and people instructing each other through direct interaction, through relationships. They require what Pope Francis (2016, September 23) has described as a “culture of encounter.”

When we faced into the question of why we and others weren’t ending homelessness, we discovered one place that was. In Great Britain, the Rough Sleepers Initiative was well on its way to reducing street homelessness by two thirds in three years. This had been a campaign pledge of Tony Blair. Once elected, he appointed Louise Casey, a brilliant change agent, to lead the effort. Coming from the homelessness sector, Louise understood that the essence of the challenge was to change the way the system functioned: to move from endless emergency responses to solutions, and to hold communities accountable for measurable reductions in street homelessness. Among the key pillars of the Rough Sleepers Unit approach were to make the process of exiting homelessness simpler and to put responsibility for making it work in the hands of the service providers, not the overwhelmed individuals on the street, for making it work. The Rough Sleepers Unit insisted on regular street counts to measure progress, and that the local outreach teams would know each person on the street by name. They prioritized the most vulnerable for assistance, and reserved accommodations for them. When their data showed many young people leaving foster care, as well as many military veterans among the homeless, they focused upstream. They engaged the relevant government agencies to make it *their* job to prevent homelessness among those leaving their institutions. Within three years, they had met their ambitious goal.

As a starting point, we adapted the Rough Sleepers Initiative to our midtown Manhattan neighborhood. We chose the same goal, to reduce street homeless by two thirds within three years. To lead what we called the “Street to Home Initiative”, we recruited someone who had never worked with the homeless, but had the experience and skills we believed would matter: the ability to build an effective team, use data to understand a problem in its context, and work without a map to achieve a clear goal. We hired a retired military operations specialist. The local organizations that stepped forward to help were also atypical: the local business improvement district, the community court and an Episcopal church.

By being out on the streets in the late night or early morning hours, and listening to each person’s story, a whole new picture of homelessness emerged for our team. Most individuals, we discovered, were in the midst of a transition or brief crisis and needed limited help. The group that had been trapped in homelessness for years was relatively small. These individuals would need permanent supportive housing and the health and mental health supports that came with it. Some of these individuals were deeply skeptical of our promise of help with housing, and only agreed to work with us once they had seen others move into homes. The biggest challenge was threading our way through a Byzantine process first to prove these men and women were homeless and qualify them to receive housing assistance. Bit by bit, the situation on the street changed. By the end of year three, our neighborhood had reduced street homelessness by 87%.

The key principle of Street to Home – define success as ending individuals’ homelessness, not providing services to them-resonated with the place and time. Though the Street to Home Initiative was underwritten by foundations, not government, New York City’s then mayor, Michael Bloomberg, believed in data as an essential tool for improving public services. Street to Home’s design and focus on results were incorporated into the city’s new street outreach contracts in 2007. Other US cities were also drawn to the idea that they

should measure the effectiveness of their efforts by reductions in homelessness.

Out of this momentum, in 2010, we invited any interested US community to be part of a collective leap to shift our focus to results. We launched the 100,000 Homes Campaign to find homes for 100,000 of the most vulnerable and chronic homeless in the country within four years. The “100,000 Homes” campaign helped communities increase their housing placements and learn to cut through bureaucratic steps that made escaping homelessness a near impossibility for those most in need of help.

186 communities participated in the Campaign, and more than 105,000 people were housed. However, no community ended homelessness during that time. In part that happened because new people continued to become homeless, and in part because the problem-solving practices that proved valuable in a sprint did not get embedded in the marathon of driving reductions in homelessness day after day.

The Rough Sleepers Initiative, Street to Home Initiative and 100,000 Homes Campaign showed how the combination of political will, a disciplined focus on results, a streamlined process for linking people to homes and a challenging deadline could achieve profound reductions in homelessness. Yet the gains proved unsustainable in most places. They were highly dependent on the commitment and attention of particular leaders. As leaders changed and priorities and ideologies shifted, the goal of ending homelessness lost urgency. Old ways of working re-emerged, along with increases in homelessness.

However we now had the clearest view of homelessness to date, and of the dynamic, shifting problem it is. Gawande (2013, July 29) had also noted that new ideas not only need help to spread, they need help to stick, and to become the way things are now done. We had discovered another gap to be closed, between a community’s capacity to end homelessness once, and the local skills, tools and systems needed to end it for good.

FOURTH GENERATION: ACCOUNTABLE COMMUNITY SYSTEMS

Each phase of response to homelessness surfaced a new type of coordination problem. Whether balancing investments in emergency responses against investments in solutions; matching those experiencing homelessness to the right help; reaching all who needed assistance, all the way through to the most overwhelmed and skeptical person; aligning the work of many organizations so that paths out of homelessness were clearly marked; embedding the most useful training and tools in each community; or making improvements stick and extend beyond political cycles, it was becoming clear that the absence of an accountable coordination mechanism for ending homelessness in each community was itself a big part of the problem.

Complex, shifting problems that present high risks for vulnerable people are solved every day by teams trained to do so, in hospitals, on construction sites, in aviation, and in many other industries. Certain types of problems are similar no matter where they show up. In our first meetings with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), which had brought improvement science to the mission of helping hospitals and physicians eliminate avoidable deaths and patient harm, hearing that insights and practices associated with the Japanese auto industry could make healthcare safer took some getting used to. Seeing the difference between hospitals that have rigorous safety cultures and those that don’t turned us into believers.

Learning that problem solving practices can move between industries spurred us to reflect on the kind of problem that homelessness is, and to look broadly for solutions to the accountability and coordination problems at the heart of persistent homelessness. These problems have made all our efforts less powerful and hindered for a generation the dedicated work of organizations serving the homeless.

But we can change that.

Six months after the 100,000 Homes Campaign

ended, Built for Zero began. 70 communities signed on to figure out together how to get all the way to a sustainable end to homelessness. We had learned by then the necessity of well organized teams in each community that shared a clear goal; of accurate information and measures to show the effect of different interventions; of training local teams in problem solving skills like design thinking to understand where the pitfalls and barriers are for avoiding or escaping homelessness and frame possible solutions, of quality improvement to test and refine ideas, and in using data to see what's working, for whom, and to help us get better at our work.

Counting down to ending homelessness is much harder than increasing the numbers of people housed. They are different activities. Getting to zero begins with a mindset that no one will be left out. It means, knowing everyone experiencing homelessness in one's community by name. It requires paying attention to a number of things at once: who is becoming homeless, and why? Are we getting people back into housing as quickly as we can? Are we using all the assets and resources we have in the community to create more housing options? What interventions are working and for whom? Where should funding be spent to have the greatest impact in reducing homelessness?

These practices are yielding results that point to a different future. Nine Built for Zero communities have ended veteran homeless, three more have ended chronic homelessness, and most have sustained the result for several years. Another 33 are seeing steady, month over month reductions. In Canada, nearly 20,000 homeless Canadians have been housed in 38 communities that are now counting down to zero. And in Finland, a similar set of strategies based on accountability for results has all but eliminated homelessness in the country. The Finnish government focused on getting each individual the help needed to exit homelessness. They implemented housing first as national policy. They converted shelters into permanent housing and continue to closely coordinate and direct resources to flag and resolve emerging housing crises quickly and keep homelessness solved.

CONCLUSION

Do we stay on the path of slow evolution or choose transformation?

We've discovered that working back from the goal of measurably ending homelessness will require (at least) five shifts in our communities: a shift of *belief*, from seeing homelessness as inevitable to being solvable; a shift of *organization*, from thinking in terms of individual programs to a shared, whole of community commitment; a shift in *information*, from generalized or estimated data on homelessness to by-name, real-time knowledge on who is experiencing homelessness and each individual and family's situation; a shift in *culture*, from complying with program rules to relentless problem solving; and a shift in *investments*, from automatically maintaining traditional services to making, targeted, data-informed, constantly monitored and ever improving investments in the things that prevent and end homelessness.

Though the skills and tools required to make these shifts may be new and stretch us to think and work in new ways, the vision of ending homelessness, for good, for everyone is not new. It is what drew all of this to this work in the first place.

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NOTES

¹ For more information see: <https://www.community.solutions/what-we-do/built-for-zero/track-our-progress>

² For more information see NYC Department of Homeless Services Daily Report <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosanne Haggerty founded and led Common Ground Community (now Breaking Ground) a developer and operator of housing for the homeless, from 1990-2010. (<https://breakingground.org>) Currently, she is president and chief executive officer of Community Solutions (<https://www.community.solutions/>)

