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It Takes a Village to Uplift a Population:
Addressing the Homeless in District 16 of Virginia

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Abstract

Homelessness is a community issue which affects every country. My research group and I decided to look into the causes of homelessness in our community. We interviewed the Fredericksburg Regional Continuum of Care (FRCoC), The Brisben Center (TBC), and Micah Ecumenical Ministries (MEM) to better understand the situation in District 16 of Virginia. This paper discusses the actions already in place in the district as well as our proposed solutions to help the homeless population. We propose acting on minimum wage, petitioning and revising a budget proposed by the FRCoC, and opening a new shelter to serve the chronically homeless. Most important, however, is the support the community provides.

Keywords: homelessness, Virginia homelessness, District 16 of Virginia, minimum wage increase, Continuum of Care, Rapid Re-Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing, types of homelessness, homelessness solutions

It Takes a Village to Uplift a Population:

Addressing the Homeless in District 16 of Virginia

For many people, it is hard to imagine being without a home. However, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), 553,742 people experienced homelessness on any given night in the United States in 2018 (“FAQs”, 2019). The reasons behind homelessness are a series of intersecting issues including but not limited to: low income, mental health (MH), housing affordability, no social support, and disability. Nonetheless, my research group and I decided to contact our local government, homeless shelter, and non-profit organization in Fredericksburg, VA, to ask their thoughts on what the leading cause was. Our findings suggest people who become homeless have low income and no social support. From this, a question arises on how to help the homeless. My group and I researched active solutions and organized our ideas on what may be the next step in addressing homelessness in our community. We propose acting on minimum wage, petitioning and revising a budget proposed by the Fredericksburg Regional Continuum of Care (FRCoC), and opening a new shelter to serve the chronically homeless. The success of each of these proposals, however, relies on the support of the community in the region.

Homelessness in Context

The problem begins with defining what homelessness is and how the definitions are not universal. Joseph Chamie (2017) of *YaleGlobal Online* noted “definitions vary across countries because homelessness is...culturally defined...” (para. 4). Chamie also noted accurate statistics are hard to come by because of limited government resources, the homeless being reluctant to register, and most importantly, how homelessness is often seen as a taboo subject for discussion (para. 5-7). Thus, we based our research off the FRCoC description of homelessness. Sam

Shoukas, the FRCoC Coordinator, defined the criteria for homelessness as follows: 1. Sleeping outside, 2. Sleeping in a car, tent, or abandoned building, and 3. Sleeping in an emergency center (personal communication, February 15, 2019). In addition, there is a difference between a person who is homeless and a person who is chronically homeless.

Someone may become homeless for a brief period due to circumstances which lead them to have insufficient funds. These occurrences may include losing a job or having a high bill resulting from a medical emergency. In such instances the person who becomes homeless has a momentary lapse of income due to situations which are relatively, albeit not always, out of their control. Most people who are homeless fall into this category, according Shoukas (personal communication, February 15, 2019). On the other hand, a person who is chronically homeless is someone who has been without a place to live on multiple occasions, has been homeless for an extended period, or both. To elaborate, the person must have experienced homelessness four or more times within a three-year span, adding together to make a year, or have gone twelve consecutive months without a home (S. Shoukas, personal communication, February 15, 2019). Furthermore, the person must have a documented disability, such as substance abuse disorder, mental health issues, or a physical disability. The NAEH claimed those who meet the criteria for chronic homelessness made up 24% of the total homeless population in January of 2018 in the United States (“Chronically Homeless”, 2019).

Virginia District 16

District 16 of Virginia is comprised of five counties: Caroline, King George, Stafford, Fredericksburg, and Spotsylvania. The FRCoC records all the individuals who are homeless in the district. When we asked Shoukas about the numbers, she replied “There are 200 homeless individuals on any given day and 907 homeless over a year period” (personal communication,

February 15, 2019). In addition to keeping track of the statistics, the FRCoC also coordinates with the local homeless shelter and other non-profit organizations which serve the homeless population of District 16. To better understand the impact of each organization on the homeless, my research group and I interviewed The Brisben Center (TBC) and Micah Ecumenical Ministries (MEM).

The Brisben Center

The local homeless shelter houses up to 80 residents at a time and is open year-round (“About”, n.d.). With services lasting up to 90 days, the shelter offers programs which help with individuals finding jobs, budgeting their finances, and gaining knowledge on nutrition. The volunteer coordinator of the shelter, Joe Hargrove, claimed “our population [comes from issues of] low income and affordable housing” (personal communication, February 15, 2019). Furthermore, the shelter adheres to a zero-tolerance policy for substance abuse and requires residents to complete daily chores as a part of their stay at the shelter. Hargrove stated, “The chronically homeless...they don’t want to stay here; because they can’t drink...they have to follow rules” (personal communication, February 15, 2019). In addition, any resident who is unable to take care of themselves, someone with a physical disability for example, is not eligible for the shelter’s services due to not having the funds for staffing.

Micah Ecumenical Ministries

The non-profit organization is a coordination of different churches in the area. According to the MEM website, the churches formed to “[assist] those whose needs were not being met” (“About Us”, 2018). In other words, MEM does not adhere to a zero-tolerance policy. MEM’s services vary throughout locations, which include the Hospitality Center, Respite House, Cold Weather Shelter, and Furniture Bank. The Cold Weather Shelter, as the name suggests, is only

open during the winter months or when certain weather conditions are met. While open seven days a week at all hours, the Respite House may only serve eight residents at a time who are ineligible for medical assistance at a hospital. This leaves the Hospitality Center as the primary resource for the homeless but is not a replacement for a shelter. Margie Brewer-Zambon, a Hospitality Coordinator at the center, concluded “there is always more need than what can be filled” when asked about the need for organizations like MEM (personal communication, February 18, 2019).

Services of FRCoC

The FRCoC also provides housing resources for the homeless community in District 16. Their housing resources utilize a Housing-First (HF) approach which focuses on getting the homeless off the streets and into housing without any additional requirements. This approach eliminates the pressure to reach ‘peak person’ before becoming eligible for housing and allows for people to work on issues such as their sobriety after finding a home, according to Shoukas (personal communication, February 15, 2019). How they use this approach is through two options: Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). RRH is tailored for most of the homeless population who need one-time assistance. This program lasts from six to nine months and is graduating. For example, the FRCoC places an individual in housing and pays for the first month’s rent. From there, the FRCoC housing subsidy gradually decreases, with the individual paying 25% one month, 50% the next, and so on based on their finances (S. Shoukas, personal communication, February 15, 2019). In addition to the financial support, RRH offers a Housing Case Management (HCM) service which helps residents with budgeting, remembering to pay rent, and job search. On the other hand, PSH serves those who meet the criteria for chronic homelessness as well as have a demonstrated long-term HCM needs. An example of long-term HCM need would be if the individual needs constant reminders due to MH issues for simple tasks such as hygiene

needs. Another difference between RRH and PSH is while it is also intended to be graduating, the PSH program is not limited and most residents only pay 30% of their income (S. Shoukas, personal communication, February 15, 2019). The reason for this is because those who fit the definition of chronic homelessness often have disabilities which prevent them from working and thus have a fixed income.

During our research, my group and I came across an article in the *Free Lance Star* which briefly described a plan proposed by the FRCoC to increase funding in 2018. Shoukas illustrated in our interview with her that the plan was asking for “half a million per year, decreasing [slightly] over time” to fund their Housing Locator, RRH, PSH, and HCM to house every unsheltered person in the district (personal communication, February 15, 2019). The funding would come from the regions within the district based on the percentage of homeless from each county. Unfortunately, the plan fell short with only Fredericksburg county agreeing to contribute.

The Next Step

My research group and I decided on three possible solutions to address the homeless population in our community. First, we believe there is reason to implement raising minimum wage. It has been over ten years since the last increase and minimum wage has been raised 22 times since its establishment in the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, according to Reburn, Moyer, Knebel, and Bowler (2018, p. 1). In addition, Reburn et al. identified Virginia as being in the top five states with the highest difference between living wage, the lowest income necessary to meet minimum standards of subsisting, and minimum wage (p. 1-3). This suggests the idea of raising minimum wage is not out of the question and Virginia may need such a change. An increase in minimum wage will make housing more affordable to lower income households. Furthermore, this would aid in preventing instances of insufficient funds which lead to most

homeless cases. However, this solution will need planning and requires support from the state. Due to the time required for this solution to be planned out thoroughly, my group and I considered a second answer which may be put into action sooner.

We believe the plan proposed by the FRCoC deserves to be revised. The services which the FRCoC offers to the homeless population has been invaluable. The HF approach which they utilize addresses both types of homeless individuals, as well as offers additional services for prevention. Thus, the previous plan failed not because of its design but because it lacked the support it needed to get off the ground. To address this issue, we decided the plan must be brought to awareness within the general population. We suggest creating a petition to have the proposal be revised and considered again by the district. To gain support for the petition, we suggest working with colleges in the region and the downtown businesses of Fredericksburg. College students are the next generation of voters and are often encouraged by their institutions to be active in their community. Businesses in downtown Fredericksburg, on the other hand, are in the middle of where most of the homeless in the district reside. Gaining support from the colleges and local businesses will be beneficial in showing the counties of District 16 the community is invested in addressing the homeless population.

Lastly, we suggest opening a new shelter. We based this decision off a question we asked the TBC and MEM. The question, 'is there an increasing need for organizations like yours', received an affirmation from both parties. Unlike the TBC, however, this shelter would focus on a HF approach to reach the population the current shelter does not serve. This would allow for the shelter to address the chronically homeless population in the region. However, the shelter would model after programs in the TBC, such as financial budgeting and HCM, which will contribute to the shelter's success. Another key aspect of this new shelter would be following the

FRCoC's lead by having residents pay 30% of their income while using their services. Similar to PSH, those who do not have income while first arriving in the shelter will have a subsidy with intention to graduate if eligible. As with other organizations in the area, the shelter would rely on donations and volunteer work from the community to provide its services. Furthermore, we believe it would be beneficial to provide tax incentive to business owners and donators for their housing or financial assistance for the shelter. Additional research would be needed to work out the specifics of such a feat. Nevertheless, community support for the TBC and MEM have allowed them to be successful without the incentive we suggest for the new shelter. Shoukas emphasized the importance of such support in her statement:

If you look at the people who are struggling from month to month, they don't look any different [than the people who are homeless]. We often say the reason these people made it and these people did not is [the] social supports [they have]. (personal communication, February 15, 2019)

Hence, we believe the most important aspect of creating the new shelter is the involvement of the community. Without their support, all the solutions proposed would get nowhere, which is why we recognize the community as the main solution to homelessness.

Homelessness is not something which can be solved in a day, a month, or even a year. It is with hard work, consistent revising, and a long-term plan that allows for success to be reached within a community. My group and I propose a long-term plan with raising minimum wage to living wage, thus decreasing the number of temporary homeless situations. Next, we propose petitioning for a revisal of the FRCoC plan. Lastly, we propose opening a new shelter to address the chronically homeless in District 16. Most important, however, is the support the community provides. After all, it takes a village.

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