**Borough Subsidization of a Transitional Housing Solution to Homelessness Relief in State College, PA**

an issue brief by Chris Sommer

It’s winter in State College, Pennsylvania. A family consisting of a now single mother and two children have just found themselves homeless after leaving their house and an abusive husband. They have no friends or family to seek help from and they are facing dangerous time spent on the streets. Every day spent living homeless increases the difficulty of societal reintegration, especially for the children. Their salvation comes in the form of a Borough-subsidized transitional housing program and entails a new life, free from abuse and full of rich experiences.

In this State College community there exists a homelessness issue that is known to very few. This issue is hidden and consists of a lot of good, hard-working community members that have fallen on hard times and simply need a helping hand. There are research-based, low-cost, proven methods for relieving the homelessness issue that involve the use of transitional housing and a housing first solution approach that would aid in the eradication of homelessness within this State College community. There are existing programs in State College that provide transitional housing but need more help than can be sustained through donations. I propose a call to action and the allocation of taxpayer funds to the Borough subsidization of transitional housing in the State College community. With a very high likelihood of success and a guarantee to reduce overall cost on the municipality, it would be in the Borough’s best interest to heed this proposition.

**Homelessness Defined**

Homelessness is literally defined as “lacking permanent housing of one’s own,” and can be found in every part of human history.1 It can be construed more broadly as “a detachment from society characterized by the absence of attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures.”2 This definition entails that homelessness causes a disconnectedness with society which can be detrimental to those trying to reintegrate after becoming homeless.

Homeless individuals can be categorized into three different types of homelessness: temporary, episodic, and chronic.3 Over the course of any large period of time, the temporarily homeless make up the majority of the homeless population.4

Temporary homelessness consists of individuals or groups that find themselves homeless due to a variety of circumstances, mostly disasters and unforeseen issues like a job-loss, death of provider, an abusive relationship, etc.5 They then are fairly quickly lifted out of homelessness by an outside support system. This outside support may consist of friends, family, a resource center, or a combination of these.6 Homeless families usually fall into the category of temporary homelessness due to the fact that they are the most readily aided.7 These are the men and women who have lost a job, the child who leaves a drug-ridden household, the mother who gets out of an abusive relationship and finds herself in the streets; these are the people who can be saved rather quickly and therefore save the state a lot of expense.

Episodic homelessness is defined as individuals and occasionally groups who fluctuate in and out of homelessness due to a variety of circumstances.8 This category of homelessness is most commonly found with drug addicts or those suffering from a mental illness because of the cyclical nature of addiction/illness and treatment.9 Episodically homeless individuals and groups are frequent users of shelters and resource centers but have a hard time being helped long-term because of their issues. They will sometimes fit into the categories of temporarily homeless or chronically homeless, depending on the circumstances.10

Chronic homelessness makes up the smallest numbers over a large period of time within homelessness statistics.11 Being chronically homeless can be defined as sustained homelessness due to either a lack of support/resources or a lack of willingness to cooperate with support.12 The chronically homeless are almost always individuals who have cut all social and familial ties and they often have mental health issues which prevent them from being helped easily. It is very difficult to help those who are chronically homeless because even if they are given every form of support possible, they might ultimately fall back into homelessness due to the circumstances which put them there in the first place.13 The chronically homeless often misrepresent the homeless as a whole because they are often thought of as the face of homelessness. These are the people who can be found on the street corners and are visibly homeless. While they are the most noticeable group, they make up the minority of homeless people over a period of time.14

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in 2014 the total homeless population and subpopulation reached 578,424 people.15 Of this number, 99,434 were found to be chronically homeless, with 15,142 of these chronically homeless being families. That leaves 478,990 people that were found to be temporarily homeless.16 So, in 2014 17.2% of homeless people in America were found to be chronically homeless and 82.8% were found to be temporarily homeless. These numbers obviously depend on the specificity of the definitions of temporary and chronic and must be scrutinized closely. However, they can still be used to generalize the current state of homelessness in America.

**Homelessness in the United States**

Homelessness has always been an issue within society. Beginning in the late 1800s, it can be seen that a variety of events including post-Civil War population displacement and European immigration created concentrated areas of homeless, immigrants, and service workers.17 These areas became known as “skid rows” and were vibrant neighborhoods which offered a large amount of resources for a transient population.18 The first skid row era in America ended with the onset of World War I which occupied much of the country’s population.

Then, in the 1920s, it can be seen that WWI produced a wave of veterans, many of which found themselves homeless due to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and other factors.19 This was coupled by the Great Depression of the 1930s which created widespread homelessness across the nation. Out of this emerged the first sustained research by sociologists in the field of homelessness.20 This wave of homelessness ended with World War II.

After WWII and up until the late 1970s, a new skid row era emerged.21 This skid row was characterized by urban slums overflowing with a homeless population. This is the scene that is typically inspired by the term “skid row”. In response to this homelessness era, cities offered emergency services and shelter but there was no extensive transitional housing program put in place.22

It was then in the early 1980s that a new era in the study of homelessness emerged. It was called the “new homelessness” and was characterized by an explosion in media coverage of homelessness issues.23 Baby-boomer college students were now flooding the job market and Vietnam veterans were suffering from PTSD and unable to find steady living situations.24 This created a growth of homelessness that found media coverage across America. Dr. Barrett Lee talks about new homelessness in the Annual Review of Sociology saying, “Soon after this latest era began, opinion polls ranked homelessness among the nation’s top domestic problems.”25 Although the new homelessness era settled down by the early 1990s, it created extensive research and a vast amount of experimental knowledge for sociologists.26 The findings produced in this era are still relied on heavily today in addressing the issue.

While interest has remained high among sociologists since the 90s and into today, homelessness has found a commonplace within American society that creates a sense of disinterest in the subject within the general public.27 However, sociological research is still called upon heavily by cities and municipalities.28 Homelessness is rarely addressed at a federal level due to the complexity of the issue and it’s regionally differing characteristics. Therefore it falls upon the responsibility of cities and states to deal with their own homelessness issues.29

**Homelessness in State College**

State College is a relatively affluent community which feeds off of Penn State University and the young crowd it draws. Unfortunately, due to this perception, it is widely thought that homelessness does not exist within this community.30 This is not the case. It is this lack of awareness that makes the situation relatively dangerous.

No, there are no large population of street-dwellers or panhandlers within the town of State College. Yes, there are a few noticeably homeless people on the streets. In general, the larger population of homeless in the State College community remain hidden.31 This hidden homelessness is worrying simply because it does not attract the necessary awareness to this issue.

Ask people in State College whether or not there exists a homelessness issue and most will tell you no. This community is caught up in the perceived affluence of the area that they are not seeing the people who struggle every day to simply remain housed. Either people are genuinely not noticing the issue or the find the issue uncomfortable and therefore ignore it altogether.32 This disconnectedness between community and issue makes it more difficult to fight said issue.33

These people may have become homeless for a variety of reasons, many of which are out of their control. According to Housing Transitions in State College, in 2014, of the 851 referrals received by Housing Transitions for their additional housing program, only 50 of them self-reported drug and alcohol as the reason.34 Over one quarter of those referrals were reported as due to abuse or conflict. Many people find themselves homeless do to the fact that they have left an abusive relationship, lost a job, or cannot work due to physical disability.35 It could be the neighbor who has been laid off or the single-mother family that is struggling with no means of support. This, coupled by the fact that housing in State College is relatively unaffordable produces a lot of unconventional or hidden homelessness that is dangerous for the individuals and detrimental to a community.36

Almost all of these cases produce a very temporary homeless population.37 Housing Transitions, Hearts for Homeless, and Out of the Cold, are the most prominent programs for homelessness relief in State College. They provide a wide variety of resources and transitional housing options for the homeless in our community and are largely responsible for lifting hundreds of people out of homelessness.38 Housing Transitions typically works with 70-100 people over the course of a year in just one of their shelters.39 Since their creation in 2014, Hearts for Homeless has helped lift over 100 people out of homelessness.40 It is these resource centers that deal with the hidden homelessness in our community. The reason they have had so much success is because there truly does exist a need for such programs in the State College community.

**Solution Approach**

There currently exists two main approaches to homelessness relief within the United States: service first and housing first.

1. **Service First**

The service first approach focuses on treating the underlying issues and then moving the client into housing once they have fulfilled a certain set of requirements.41 This approach has been proven very ineffective. These people have already lost a great deal of confidence in themselves and typically do not respond very well to a list of requirements.42 It involves a lot of places where the person could fail (again) and prolongs their time spent on the streets.43 Dr. Barrett Lee, professor of sociology and homeless studies at Penn State, gives insight into the shortcomings of the service first approach in saying,

*“The assumption is that there is something wrong with them. It may be that they lack jobs skills or that they have some sort of health problem. But we assume that there is something the matter with them and before we even think about moving them into a more stable residential environment, before we even think about trying to help them become self-supporting, we must treat them. All of these treatment-based approaches are ‘you have to do A, B, and C before you’re allowed to move to D’. That was the popular approach between the mid-80s and until recently.”44*

1. **Housing First**

The counter approach to service first is a housing first solution. This has been proven to be far more effective and thus will be the focus of solving the homelessness issue in State College.45 A housing first approach involves placing the homeless person into housing as quickly as possible. Allowing the person into housing immediately gets them off of the dangerous streets and into a secure situation where they can find comfort and confidence again.46 Once the person is housed, services and treatment can be offered optionally. Often times, due to the low pressure nature of this approach, the person will then take it upon themselves to try treat the underlying issue.47 Dr. Lee provides insight again saying,

*“The idea here is that a lot of these changes that needs to be made will be made more easily once they have the safety of a home. The strategy is that if someone is on the streets, the longer they are there the more harm that is done, so you get them off of the streets and into housing as quickly as possible. This stable living situation is usually apartments. Then you don't put a lot of requirements on them... don't make them go through counseling or detox or treatment. Get them into housing first, then give them the option of taking advantage of those services. What we’re finding, more often than not, is that people respond better to this low pressure approach. Give people place of their own, give them that security, then they're more likely to take it upon themselves to change.”48*

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a housing first model operates under the proven premises that:49

**i.** Homelessness is first and foremost a housing crisis and can be addressed through the provision of safe and affordable housing.

**ii.** All people experiencing homelessness, regardless of their housing history and duration of homelessness, can achieve housing stability in permanent housing. Some may need very little support for a brief period of time, while others may need more intensive and long-term supports.

**iii.** Everyone is “housing ready.” Sobriety, compliance in treatment, or even a clean criminal history is not necessary to succeed in housing. Rather, homelessness programs and housing providers must be “consumer ready.”

**iv.** Many people experience improvements in quality of life, in the areas of health, mental health, substance use, and employment, as a result of achieving housing.

**v.** People experiencing homelessness have the right to self-determination and should be treated with dignity and respect.

**vi.** The exact configuration of housing and services depends upon the needs and preferences of the population.

HUD’s model for housing first involves a few core guidelines and principles which contribute to its effectiveness. These principles include:50

* Few to no programmatic prerequisites to permanent housing entry
* Low barrier admission policies
* Rapid and streamlined entry into housing
* Supportive services are voluntary, but can and should be used to persistently engage tenants to ensure housing stability
* Tenants have full rights, responsibilities, and legal protections
* Practices and policies to prevent lease violations and evictions
* Applicable in a variety of housing models

These principles allow for the lowest pressure recovery system in which the person finds skills, confidence, and a self-motivated call for reform.

The effectiveness of a housing first model can be seen in the results of a studies done by Pathways to Housing, a New York City based center for housing first homeless relief efforts. Pathways to Housing has been providing housing options to the homeless in NYC since 1992 and now serves as a hugely successful model for other resource centers.51

Since its founding, housing retention rates have remained at 85 – 90 percent even among individuals who have not succeeded in other programs.52 The low-pressure approach of the housing first model actually works and works immediately. Pathways to Housing has also done extensive research through evidence-based studies in New York City. These studies compare the outcomes of individuals in housing first programs versus service first programs. The results: over the course of two years, participants in housing first programs were found to remain stably housed for 80% of the time while those in service first programs were only stable for 30%.53 Similar studies consistently yield similar results regardless of location.

A housing first approach to homelessness relief is also the least expensive solution to any municipality. According to research conducted by Pathways to Housing, a housing first system costs an agency $57 a day per individual in New York City.54 Compare that to $77 a day for shelter-stay, $232 a day for jail, and $1200 a day for hospital stay and it is easy to see that it is the most cost effective solution.55

To recap, the housing first solution to homelessness relief involves getting people off of the streets and into housing as quickly as possible. Then, once housed, services can be provided to manage each case. This solution has been proven highly effective and relatively inexpensive for taxpayers and municipalities alike. Cities across the country have now adopted this system for homelessness relief and have found much success in reintegrating homeless populations into society.

**Transitional Housing in State College**

Currently there are two programs in State College which provide any sort of transitional housing to the homeless members of our community: Housing Transitions and Hearts for Homeless.56

Housing Transitions offers a supportive housing program which currently consists of 8 units scattered around State College. Participants are allowed to stay for a maximum of two years in this subsidized housing. They are offered counseling and treatment options based on their individual cases and are monitored constantly for progress.57 Housing Transitions has seen a large amount of success through its transitional housing program and is a beacon of hope for the homelessness situation in our community.

Hearts for Homeless is a relatively newer resource center located in downtown State College. It was founded initially in order to provide a place for homeless community members to spend the cold winter days.58 It has since developed its own housing first transitional housing program in response to an apparent need. Like Housing Transitions, Hearts for Homeless models its housing program off of a traditional housing first system. They provide optional services to their clients and monitor closely as the individuals learn how to take care of themselves and live with other people.59 They focus on teaching the everyday skills necessary to live independently and case manage each individual. Since its creation in February of 2014, hearts for Homeless has lifted over one hundred people out of homelessness, partially due to their transitional housing program.60 In fact, they have found so much success in their transitional housing program that they are currently making efforts on expanding this program through the purchase of two more 5-person units, thereby expanding their transitional housing capacity by ten people.61

Housing Transitions and Hearts for Homeless are currently independent of each other but still work together to provide the best situation for an individual based on that individual’s case.

**The Proposal**

While a housing first approach to relieving homelessness in State College is by far the most cost effective solution, it is still rather difficult for small nonprofits like Housing Transitions and Hearts for Homeless to provide such a service while depending solely on donations. These transitional housing programs are absolutely necessary for the healthy continuation and growth of a community like State College.62 It would be to the benefit of the State College Borough, its residents, and its homeless community members that these transitional housing programs remain well kept and focused on solving the homelessness issue. Therefore the State College Borough should make it a priority to allocate taxpayer funds for the subsidization of said housing programs. In this way, the State College community can rest assured that homelessness relief efforts are being taken seriously and handled correctly through the use of their tax dollars. Also, subsidizing the existing programs of organizations like Hearts for Homeless or Housing Transitions ensures that the money is being put to the correct uses and is backed by extensive research and community experience.

Imagine this: One of our community members, a hard working individual, is let go from his or her job and is therefore hit with a daunting predicament. He or she cannot afford the high price of rent in State College and does not have a support system of friends or family to rely on. Said individual is forced to vacate his or her apartment and ends up on the streets. He or she then finds out about Hearts for Homeless or Housing Transitions and is immediately put into Borough-subsidized transitional housing where he or she regains the confidence and help required to enter the job market again and reintegrate back into society. It would be a much different story for this individual if he or she did not have the option of a housing first system of transitional housing. This is the story of a lot of homeless people in the State College community and this is why we need organizations like Hearts for Homeless and Housing Transitions.

Proposed here is not an unwarranted, unregulated flow of money into the corruption of a bureaucratic monster. It is rather a focused repurposing of funds to a very specific program that is maintained by two highly reputable organizations. Said housing first based program has been proven, both in our community and through huge nationwide research studies, to be extremely effective in terms of cost and results.63 Proposed here is a call to action of this State College community to get behind our transitional housing programs and make a verified difference in the future course of homelessness relief. Please, consider this an official plea for assistance and create a plan for future subsidization of the housing first solution within this State College community.

**In Nuce**

Homelessness is an issue that plagues almost every community across America and State College is no exception.65 In the State College community there exists large amounts of hidden homelessness that much of the community is unaware of. This homelessness takes on several different forms; a child who has escaped a drug-ridden home, a mother that has left an abusive relationship, or the amputee that cannot hold down a job. There has been extensive research conducted which suggests that a housing first solution which involves the use of supportive transitional housing is the most effective way to relieve homelessness in any given community.66 In an effort to streamline the transitional housing process and guarantee that the homeless members of our community are taken care of, I propose that the State College Borough subsidize existing transitional housing programs. You can be the difference in the lives of hundreds of community members. You can be a part of a State College that made history by eradicating homelessness. You can be the example set for other communities across the country. You can do all of this by simply supporting our homeless resource centers and their transitional housing programs. Thank you.

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