

*Conferring on Homelessness***Beyond Housing****A National Conversation on Child Homelessness and Poverty 2016**

From January 13–15, 2016, ICPH hosted the 4th biennial Beyond Housing conference, bringing together more than 600 people from 42 states and six countries in New York City to discuss best practices and share insights on how to address the issue of family homelessness with tools that stem far beyond simply housing.

Pre-conference Site Visits

The first day of the conference brought participants to one of five different sites in New York City and the surrounding area that provide direct service or opportunities to homeless, formerly homeless, or at-risk youth, children, and families.

One group travelled to the Ali Forney Drop-In Center in Harlem, the nation's first 24-hour drop-in center for homeless LGBTQ youth. Here, youth ages 16 to 24 receive access to food, medical care, mental health services, education, and job training. The center recently launched a housing program for the specialized needs of homeless transgender teens and offers hormone therapy at a medical clinic. Those who visited the Ali Forney Drop-In Center learned about the safe and supportive environment the center provides to this vulnerable and often underserved population.

The New York City Family Justice Center, Manhattan, provides free criminal justice, civil, legal, and social services for survivors of domestic violence, elder abuse, and sex trafficking. Participants who attended this site learned how 21 key city agencies, community, social, and civil legal services providers, and the district attorney's office located on-site work together to make it easier for survivors to get help. Children and parents are served regardless of immigration status, income, or language spoken, and a children's room gives kids a place to play while their parents receive services.

Another group of participants toured Broadway Housing Communities' Sugar Hill Development. This affordable housing site

is also home to an early childhood center for more than 100 children and a museum of children's art and storytelling. The museum, which is focused on the developmental needs of children ages three to eight, maintains art exhibits, hosts an artist-in-residence, and employs a number of storytellers. The Sugar Hill Development meets the needs of the community with their emphasis on child- and family-centered programming.

For those who traveled to Yonkers, New York, Greyston Bakery described their open hiring policy. The bakery employs people regardless of their level of education, work history, or past social barriers, such as incarceration, homelessness, or drug use. Greyston also provides support, resources, and other social services that offer a road map to self-sufficiency in a program they refer to as "pathmaking." Greyston Bakery was featured in our Spring 2014 issue of *UNCENSORED* magazine.

"It's always informative to see something firsthand. I have read about Greyston but took away so much more as a result of this visit," commented one attendee.

The fifth group of site visit attendees toured Saratoga Family Inn, a Community Residential Resource Center (CRRC) operated by Homes for the Homeless. CRRCs combine the basic services of a traditional shelter with a wide variety of programs for families residing in the shelter and those from surrounding neighborhoods. The Saratoga offers child-centered services such as day care, after-school, and recreation programs, in addition to adult services like career training, housing assistance, and life-skills classes.

on the Homefront

Site visit attendees commented on how helpful it was to see how other programs similar to their own operate, to learn the challenges they have faced, and to hear the lessons they have to share.

Beyond Housing—Day One Welcome, Letitia James

The conference proper kicked off with welcoming remarks from New York City Public Advocate Letitia James. Public



New York City Public Advocate Letitia James examined the realities facing the 77,000 homeless students in New York City.

Advocate James helps to make the voices of those facing discrimination and injustice, and those without resources, heard in government. She has a long history of advocating for children and families through her work for universal free lunch in public schools, protecting children in foster care, advocating for family leave, and fighting to raise the minimum wage.

She has worked to put a face on what homelessness is, not just in New York City, but also around the country.

In her remarks, the Public Advocate emphasized that homelessness is multifaceted—and it is a children’s issue. “There are too many children in our homeless system. Homeless children are the most vulnerable New Yorkers. They are voiceless, and invisible.”

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Public Advocate James went into depth about the student homelessness crisis New York City now faces, explaining that there are 77,000 homeless students in New York City’s public school system. “Some of these children are in shelters, some are sleeping on couches at friends’ houses or relatives apart-

ments. The impact of having an unstable home environment is traumatic on children; it has a lifelong impact.”

“Children are our most precious resource,” she continued, “and these are the most formative years of their lives. We need to do more to ensure they have a stable home, food to eat, and have the energy to come to school every day and learn. We know that education is the key to ending poverty.”

She also spoke about the realities of family homelessness in New York City, the challenges these families face, and the factors that contribute to their homelessness. According to Public Advocate James, there are gaps in the services available for these families and systematic changes need to be made. “We need more resources for our most vulnerable, our defenseless, and our innocent children.”

Remarks, Dr. Ralph da Costa Nunez

Following the Public Advocate’s inspirational remarks, Dr. Ralph da Costa Nunez, president of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness detailed how the country arrived at the family homelessness crisis it faces today. Dr. Nunez argued that after 30 years, this issue should no longer be called a homelessness “crisis,” but rather an institutional problem of very severe poverty.

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—Dr. Ralph da Costa Nunez

In New York, and across much of the country, the policies to reduce homelessness have included housing, prevention, and vouchers. However, as Dr. Nunez noted, each of these policies has limitations. In addition, there are different types of homeless families with varying levels of need. There is no one-size-fits-all policy.

One priority for addressing family homelessness, however, is education. Dr. Nunez argued that if we fail to address the educational needs of homeless children, the cycle of poverty will continue. To meet these educational needs, services must be provided in shelter. “For 30 years we have been approaching homelessness in the wrong way. We have been trying to make families fit into shelters and fit into policy systems that we have put in place—when we should be making shelters fit families. What are *their* needs?”

Keynote, Richard Rothstein

For the morning keynote, Richard Rothstein, a research associate focusing on education, race, and ethnicity from the Eco-



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Mr. Rothstein, former national education columnist for the *New York Times*, former visiting professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, spoke about the failure of the social and economic conditions that bring children to schools with concentrated disadvantages. When every child in a school has disadvantages, Mr. Rothstein said, teachers cannot dedicate the time and resources they need to each and every one of them. These are not failing schools; it is a failing social system.

“We will never accomplish the things we want to accomplish in our schools so long as our schools are segregated. And schools are increasingly segregated in this country today. They are more segregated than at any time since *Brown v. Board of Education*.”

“Public policies have segregated every metropolitan area in the country in violation of constitutional provisions.”

—Richard Rothstein

Mr. Rothstein argued that this segregation is not by accident, but rather it is segregation by public policy. He cited the long history of government policies (such as public housing laws, racial zoning ordinances, homeownership laws, and the

economic Policy Institute, took a step back to put the country’s current economic and social crises in a broader context by looking at how the U.S. arrived at the segregation and racial inequality it faces today.

redlining of neighborhoods) that led the country to this point. According to Mr. Rothstein, “Public policies have segregated every metropolitan area in the country in violation of constitutional provisions, imposing upon us an obligation which we have not recognized, and which if we do not recognize will continue to leave us in the situation we are in.”

“So long as we think segregation happened by accident,” he continued, “it is inevitable that we would think it can only be corrected by accident. If we understand, however, that this is a state system of segregation whose effects endure to this day, all kinds of possibilities open up to address it.”

Lunch Keynote, Peter Miller

The lunch keynote was given by Peter Miller, associate professor at the School of Education and Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mr. Miller was formerly a high school teacher and shelter employee and now studies issues of leadership, policy, homelessness, poverty, and university-school-community partnerships.



Mr. Miller shared the lessons he learned from the last 10 years in shelters, schools, and early childhood centers, stating, “If we want to learn about and respond to homelessness, we cannot do it from a comfortable distance.”

His keynote speech focused on every day innovations that can be made by anyone to support homeless children and their families. Mr. Miller recognized that in the field of family homelessness there are big policy solutions, small day-to-day service questions, and the work “somewhere in the middle.” He suggested numerous ways that individuals working “in the middle” can function best, to shape the everyday in a positive way.

Peter Miller’s keynote focused on everyday innovations that anyone can use to make a difference in the lives of children experiencing homelessness.

He recommended refocusing on making the everyday better. According to Mr. Miller, the everyday “is not inconsequential.”

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To best serve homeless children and families, Mr. Miller suggested using the acronym BEETZ:

- Brokering—connecting with people where they are.
- Embedding—staying connected and getting up close to the issue to reduce gaps in perception.
- Experimenting—allowing new ideas to come forward and trying new things.
- Targeting of high doses—focusing on and making use of the everyday, routine activities.
- Zeal in all practice—working with enthusiasm and passion.

Reception and Awards

Day One ended with a reception and awards ceremony hosted by ICPH. The Beyond Housing award honors people and organizations whose work exemplifies the idea that homelessness is much more than a housing issue. Recipients’ work goes “beyond housing” to provide services and support to homeless families while keeping the needs of children at the forefront.

Project Create in Washington, DC received the Beyond Housing award for an organization working locally with children in shelter and in the community to nourish their minds, creativity, and curiosity. Maggie Ridden, executive director of the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, who nominated Project Create for the Beyond Housing award, explained, “Project Create provides thousands of local DC students living in homelessness, who are unstably housed or in high-poverty neighborhoods, with the opportunity to transform their lives through artistic expression. It is a profound thing to give a young person when everything else is unstable.”

“I spend a lot of time navigating the homeless world,” she continued. “What I have discovered is that rarely is a space youth-friendly. A space that empowers young people to be creative, to have their own opportunities for discussion and creative thought, and to self explore. Those are all elements that go

beyond housing to make an enriching, holistic youth development process, opportunity, and program, which is why we ultimately nominated Project Create for this award.”

Upon receipt of the award, Project Create Executive Director Christie Walser noted, “The act of artistic creation is transformative and all children have the right to experience the arts.”

Project CATCH received the Beyond Housing award for an organization working comprehensively to address the needs of homeless families. Mary Haskett, a professor at North Carolina State University and advisory board member of Project CATCH, introduced the organization. “CATCH stands for Community Action Targeting Children Who Are Homeless and it is a community collaboration of 11 programs in the Wake County, North Carolina area that serve families experiencing homelessness. The focus of the project is really to be the voice of children’s mental health.”

Jennifer Tisdale, coordinator of Project CATCH, accepted the award and explained, “We are all about people; we are about connection, we are about relationships, and more than anything we are about the kids.”

A third award, for an individual working at a national level affecting local educational programs for homeless children and youth, was given to Diana Bowman, former director of the National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE.

“For over 20 years, the work that I have done on behalf of homeless children and youth has been a passion, a mission, and a labor of love,” she said in a video accepting the award. “I think it is all of us working together that are able to make a difference for these homeless children and youth.”

Their work is featured in this issue of *UNCENSORED*.

Beyond Housing—Day Two

The second day of the conference began with a presentation by Nisha Beharie, postdoctoral fellow at the National Development and Research Institutes, and Angela Paulino, project coordinator at the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University, on the HOPE Family Program (HIV Prevention for Parents and Early Adolescents). Ms. Beharie and Ms. Paulino spoke about the development and implementation of this family-based, HIV and substance use prevention education program for homeless youth living in New York City Tier II shelters, as well as the findings from a study on the effectiveness of the program.

Final Keynote, Linda Tirado

The final keynote was delivered by Linda Tirado, author of *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*. In her book, and



Linda Tirado told her story of poverty, housing instability, and raising a family on minimum and low-wage jobs while placing her story in the greater context of what it means to be poor in America.

at the conference, Ms. Tirado told her own story of poverty, housing instability, and raising a family on minimum and low-wage jobs while placing her story in the greater context of what it means to be poor in America today.

She explained, “There is a sense of disenfranchisement. That sense that the government is not ‘doing,’ the sense that there is no ‘we’—it is us against them.”

Ms. Tirado brought with her a fresh and candid perspective of the struggle those living in poverty face, addressing the many misconceptions about poverty and homelessness and emphasizing the need for less judgment and more understanding.

“We cannot have an underclass that continues to grow and a country that is going to be stable.”

—Linda Tirado

“The point is, we are all in this together and it is our problem if we do not understand that with a quickness. We cannot have an underclass that continues to grow and a country that is going to be stable.”

She emphasized to those at the conference who work on the front lines of poverty and homelessness the importance of standing by their clients. “It is your job to protect your clients,” she said. “To make a safe space for us to talk about our own trauma without fear that we will be further brutalized.”

Breakout Sessions

Throughout the conference, participants were invited to attend breakout sessions on topics including advocacy and coalition building, employment and adult skill building, education and enrichment, health, organizational and staff development, policy and research, program strategies, shelter and housing, trauma, and youth. More than 50 sessions were offered by organizations from across the U.S. and Canada.

Serving Our Kids Foundation

Dale Darcas, executive director of Serving Our Kids Foundation, presented “How to Build an Effective Coalition to Successfully Serve a Need,” which looked at how his program began by feeding 20 homeless and at-risk children in one school and grew into a coalition that has fed more than 186,000 children.

Serving Our Kids Foundation is an organization dedicated to feeding and serving homeless and at-risk children in Clark County, Nevada. This grassroots, volunteer organization utilizes the strength of community volunteers and donations to ensure children are fed for the weekends and provided with personal care items. As a 100 percent volunteer-based organization, Serving Our Kids Foundation relies on community organizations and volunteers to make its work possible.

Mr. Darcas provided specific suggestions and examples for how best to build a similar coalition:

- Identify a need
- Develop strategic partnerships
- Maintain and grow partnerships
- Build a community of excited volunteers who not only physically turn up to support, but also spread the word to others
- Create positive public awareness
- Connect and build bonds with other community groups
- Empower affluent school children to support children who are just like them, but do not have access to the same resources
- Develop sustainable grassroots fundraising
- Create and execute plans to achieve objectives

Since the Beyond Housing conference, Serving Our Kids Foundation has continued growing. Title I HOPE: Homeless Outreach Program for Education, a program within the Clark County School District, and Three Square, Southern Nevada’s only food bank and the area’s largest hunger-relief organization, have begun working with Serving Our Kids Foundation. In addition,

ChildRun chose Serving Our Kids Foundation as one of three charities they will sponsor. ChildRun is an upcoming reality television show that will host a 10K run and dinner gala fundraiser to raise money and awareness for Serving Our Kids Foundation.

"I thank you for inspiring me at your conference to be better and keep going," said Mr. Darcas when sharing the news with ICPH.

Raising the Roof

Carolann Barr and Caitlin Boros from Raising the Roof, a Canadian organization dedicated to long-term solutions to homelessness, presented "A Holistic Approach to Ending Child and Family Homelessness." Ms. Barr and Ms. Boros widened the scope with which we look at homelessness by providing a snapshot of the issue in Canada.

More than 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year, with young people ages 16–24 making up about 20 percent of the homeless population. Between 2005 and 2009, the estimated number of children using emergency shelter grew by 50 percent. More than 1.3 million children live in poverty in Canada.

Raising the Roof believes that "by educating Canadians, learning from and sharing community-based work, and developing a practical planning framework, we can develop solutions to child and family homelessness in Canada." As a part of educating Canadians on homelessness, Raising the Roof has generated several public awareness campaigns. The Humans for Humans ad campaign humanizes those experiencing homelessness. In these advertisements, which received international media attention, people experiencing homelessness read mean tweets written about homeless people. Their emotional responses help to dispel some of the misconceptions about homelessness.

According to their report, *Beyond Housing First: A Holistic Response to Family Homelessness in Canada*, "Homelessness is not a social concern that occurs in a vacuum, but one that intersects with multiple social concerns, including affordable housing, income, food security, discrimination, and gender and intimate partner violence (IPV). When it is viewed this way, solutions can be envisioned in a holistic manner,

where interventions are geared at strengthening the foundations of our society, not just ensuring people have housing."

Photovoice

James Canfield from the University of Cincinnati, and Dana Harley and Amy Trostle from Northern Kentucky University, presented "What Do Homeless Students See as Their Biggest Barriers to Graduation? A Participatory Action Research Project Using Photovoice."

"This project began when a concerned parent approached our team about the increase in homelessness in her child's school district," explained James Canfield, an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. "She put us into direct contact with the district's administration and we began our partnership to combat issues related to dropout [sic] for homeless high school students."

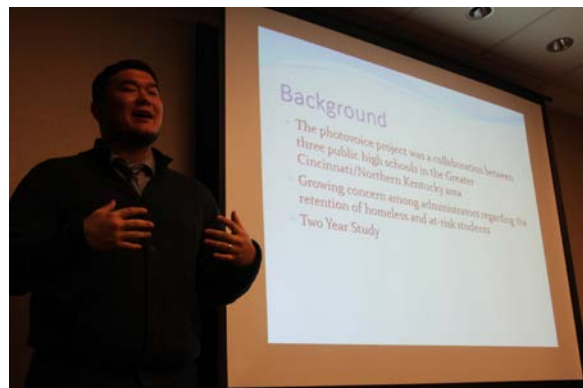
The group gave each homeless high school student a camera and asked them to take pictures of things that would help them to graduate and things that stood in the way. They then had the students describe what they saw in the photos. Out of these interviews emerged dominant themes of what enabled students to graduate and what barriers to graduation they encountered.

"We presented for school faculty and staff to show what their homeless students faced as they pursued education," explained Mr. Canfield. "The teachers were literally speechless as we showed them their students' voices." The group also held a public gallery show of the photographs.

While many knew the issues that plagued their area, it was powerful for them to see evidence of those issues. For example, heroin is a widely-known problem for the area. "For a student to take a picture of a used needle on their school route deeply impacted school administration and teachers," said Mr. Canfield.

He concluded, "We provided a voice to homeless students and empowered them to tell the community and stakeholders where change is needed."

Several other programs from the conference will be featured in future issues of *UNCENSORED*. Videos of the keynote speeches and the awards reception, and session handouts and PowerPoint presentations, are available at BeyondHousing.ICPHusa.org. ■



James Canfield from the University of Cincinnati describes a photography project used to give homeless students a voice and to learn more about what they see as their barriers to graduation.