

on the Record

Diana Bowman

A Conversation on Student Homelessness

Diana Bowman, former director of the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at SERVE at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, is our Beyond Housing 2016 honoree “for an individual working at a national level affecting local educational programs for homeless children and youth.” Diana spent her entire career working with and on behalf of homeless students and their families. She has had a direct impact on thousands of homeless children and their families as well as school districts, service providers, and advocates. As director, Diana worked on everything from developing training tools and tool kits for state coordinators of homeless education, to assisting homeless families directly in getting the help they need, to partnering with people and organizations across the country. UNCENSORED spoke with Diana to learn more about her work, student homelessness, and the challenges homeless families face.



Q. How did you get involved in working with and on behalf of homeless students and their families?

A. I have always loved working with at-risk students. Years ago, I taught writing and reading classes at a small college in a rural area to freshmen who, for the most part, came from impoverished backgrounds and were the first in their generation to attend college. I loved their tenaciousness and practical perspectives. Some years later, at a time of transition in my life, I attended an annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEH CY], and hearing the stories of challenge and triumph and seeing an army of people committed to the success of homeless children and youth, I knew that working in this field was where I wanted to spend my time. And it just so happened that an opportunity at the National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE] came my way, which enabled me to merge my passion and my profession.

Q. What do you see as the greatest achievement of the homeless services and/or education community in terms of serving homeless students during the span of your career? What is your biggest disappointment or challenge that remains?

A. When I first started working at NCHE, there was much inconsistency in the ways homeless children and youth were enrolled and served in schools. With the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act in 2002, every school district was required to appoint a local liaison who would be the key contact for implementing the law and ensuring that homeless children and youth were enrolled and connected to programs and services. Having a designated person in school districts has made a huge difference in implementation and accountability. Years ago, just getting homeless children and youth enrolled in school, particularly when they did not have the required documents, was one of the biggest challenges. Now, the

focus is more on ensuring that they attend regularly, participate fully in educational opportunities, and succeed in school.

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I think the biggest disappointment and challenge is that the number of homeless families, children, and youth continues to increase. It would be so great if those of us who work in the field were no longer needed because societal and systemic changes ensured that all people had safe and affordable housing. I would take even a slow, steady decline in numbers, but that does not seem to be happening. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that the number of homeless children and youth identified in schools increased by 15 percent over the past three years.¹ In the meantime, those who work on behalf of homeless children and youth need to continue to support young people from the cradle to college or career and keep them healthy and in school so that they will be strong, productive, and self-sufficient adults. We also need to advocate for changes in laws and policies that will create the context and environment for their success.

Q. Why do you think that family homelessness remains an invisible issue?

A. For years, the focus of homelessness has been on chronically homeless adults, but I think that is shifting. A number of federal, state, and local programs are focusing efforts in communities on families and youth experiencing homelessness. Nevertheless, many communities are not aware that a great number of homeless families are not found in shelters. The U.S. Department of Education data show that in the 2013–2014 school year, 76 percent of homeless students were living in doubled-up

situations. Families living doubled up are considered by many not to be precariously housed, yet these families, children, and youth live in stressful situations knowing that they can be on the street at the whim of their hosts and are often isolated from services that can more easily target people who are staying in shelters. The Department of Education data also show that homeless families live in cars, low-rent hotels and motels, and substandard housing, each with significant challenges but often beyond the awareness of the community and beyond the reach of mainstream services.

Q. What is the most frequent need of homeless students that you have heard of directly from the students that would surprise most people?

A. One of the key messages that has stuck in my mind came from a homeless youth who excelled in school. She said, “Do not hold homeless children and youth to lower expectations. If anything, have higher expectations because they have a bigger mountain to climb.” Building on that message, I believe that the role of educators, service providers, and mentors is to provide homeless children and youth with the resources and encouragement to meet those higher expectations. Moreover, we should acknowledge their creativity and resilience—for example, the homeless child who could think of more ways to use scissors than anyone else in her classroom or the homeless youth who folded his clothes and put them under his pillow at night where he slept in a park so that his clothes would look ironed.

Q. Moving forward, what is the biggest challenge that those providing service or advocacy face?

A. I would say keeping up the momentum. My colleagues across the country are an incredibly dedicated group of people who work long hours and struggle to ensure that homeless families, children, and youth get the services they need, both directly and indirectly. It is a really long haul, but we need to look at the progress we have made. The recent reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act strengthens the McKinney-Vento Act and came

¹ Federal Data Summary: School Years 2011–12 to 2013–14, NCHE, <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1112-1314.pdf>.

about from the tireless efforts of national and grassroots advocates, but there is so much more that needs to be done and we need to stay the course.

Q. What have you learned from homeless students and their families?

A. I guess one of the most important things I have learned is that, for the most part, it is not homeless families, children, and youth that need to be “fixed.” It is the systems in which they operate that need to provide an environment where all people can be healthy, housed, and hopeful. Most of the homeless parents I have encountered love their children

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fiercely and will do anything to give them opportunities. They see homelessness as a temporary condition, not a defining characteristic of who they are. Children and youth want to have as normal a life as possible, not to be labeled as “homeless” as if that suggests some innate deficiency.

Q. In your work, have you seen differences in how students are being served across the country? If so, what are they? Do they differ because of local issues and resources?

A. I think the biggest difference I have seen is in urban and rural areas. There are different challenges and resources that each of these areas has. For instance, in urban areas, homeless families have access to shelters, public transportation, and social services, yet they may not have the nurturing community spirit that is found in rural areas, where the motto is often, “We take care of our own.” On the other hand, in rural areas, families are more likely to live in doubled-up situations because of the lack of shelters and can face greater transportation and employment challenges and challenges with accessing services.

Q. Why do you think permanent solutions to family homelessness need to go beyond housing?

A. I do not think you can ignore the fact of vast income inequality in our society. This plays out in many families not being able to afford housing and other subsistence needs, as well as not being able to accumulate wealth and resources that can sustain them when they face adversity. Homelessness often is part of a downward spiral that is hard to reverse when families do not have resources to draw on. ■



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