

Why Social Work for the Homeless?

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The preamble to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states that “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.” This kind of mission statement makes it easy to make the case that engaging in work to prevent and eliminate homelessness is in essence social work.

Homelessness is a relatively easy idea to explain to everyday Americans, but unfortunately can be quite complex and difficult to conceptualize. When I tell you that I met a homeless person yesterday, you are likely thinking of an unshaven, dirty ragged individual sleeping on the street at night and during the day holding up a cardboard box sign that asks for money. You might be picturing a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD, a yellow-toothed woman with heroin addiction, slowly pushing a rusted metallic

shopping cart filled with recyclable soda cans and smelly clothes stuffed into plastic bags. Somehow, largely because of governmental policies that criminalize poverty and homelessness, these smelly, dirty, mentally ill drug addicts holding up cardboard signs have become the public image of homelessness. They are powerful images, ones that affect even social workers and aspiring social workers. It's upon the backdrop of such images that this Pinterest Board must address the question, "Why social work for the homeless?"

The reality is that most people in the United States who make it their lifelong careers to help the homeless and those at the risk of homelessness are not social workers. Government agencies and departments devoted to preventing and reducing homelessness such as the Homeless Services Bureau of Boston Public Health Commission are predominantly staffed by those without social work background and education. They are doctors, lawyers, finance managers, public administration officials, researchers with degrees in mathematics, economics, English, and/or sociology. Even within not-for-profit organizations dedicated and funded to serve the homeless are mostly composed of workers and volunteers who would not identify as nor be identified as social workers.

The stereotypical image of homelessness has misled the public, which includes social workers. That image represents a tiny portion of the homeless population. A more accurate image would be that of a 1st grade students laughing and playing around with each other during recess at a local public elementary school. It's a more accurate image because statistically children in public schools make up the majority of the homeless population. A few of them are out on the streets, but most would be unseen by the general public as they attend schools, live with two or three other families in the same apartment building (doubled-up families), are in motels subsidized by the local government, in churches, or in shelters. Many of their parents work at least one job (20% of the homeless population) but whether working or unemployed, they do not have the resources (both economic resources and psychological willpower) at the moment to escape their predicament, which to any onlooker, is more like poverty than what the public thinks of as "homelessness."

Perhaps this is why though most homeless services workers are not social workers, most social workers in the United States will at some points or at many points in their careers have to assist clients who are homeless, who are about to be homeless. Poverty and homelessness are conditions that affect the vast majority of the social workers' clients. Why social work for the homeless?

Well, perhaps, the more difficult question is “why not?” A more rhetorical question is, “Aren’t we doing social work for the homeless already anyway?”

Indeed, social workers in all their capacities – as private practice therapists, discharge planners in hospitals, counselors in schools, consultants to not-for-profit organizations, policy analysts, foster care social workers... – already engage in social work for the homeless.

The homeless are White, Black, Asian, Latino, and/or Middle Eastern. They are men, women, straight, gay, bi, trans, and/or other gender identity. They are single, with domestic partner, widowed, with children, with friends, with family, somehow allied and tied to others socially. They are babies, children, teenagers, young adults, grown adults, elderly, and the dying. Their health and mental health encompass all spectrums, from addictions and compulsions to conspiracy theories to severe mental health disorders to normal health to genius intelligence. They might have physical disabilities and physical injuries and they might not. They usually have other identities they’d prefer to be known as, as veterans, as history teachers, as mothers, as fathers, as writers, as workers, as survivors, as human beings who are just like you and me, as valuable and contributing members of

society, who despite of and because of their current difficulties, are still alive and kicking.

Helping these people is not about giving them homes (though yes, Housing First is very effective) and then saying that homelessness is solved. On the other hand, it's definitely not about cutting all benefits and services to them and saying that it's their fault that they're poor and homeless. It is looking at the mirror and realizing everyday that homelessness is us. A society that allows someone to sleep in the streets, doubled-up, in shelters, especially a five-year-old someone, is us, and it doesn't have to be. Anyone can become poor, and anyone can become homeless. When we look in the mirror, that possibility should be very clear to us, and that's what social work for the homeless is all about, to work towards a society that makes us proud to be us.

This text has been translated into Persian. To study it, visit the Iranian Social Workers site.

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