

Affordable Housing and Homelessness Adult Forum Follow Up

On April 16, in our Adult Forum, we had the opportunity to hear from six members of our community connected to the related issues of affordable housing and homelessness. A plethora of topics to discuss and the incredible knowledge of our guest speakers meant we ran out of time and were not able to address questions submitted by you, the audience. After our time together, though, I did submit your questions in writing to our guests. Two of them have responded, Katie Dillon, Executive Director of Align Minneapolis, and David Hewitt, Director of Housing Stability for Hennepin County. The submitted questions and their answers, with some minor edits for length and clarity, are below.

Q: How do we disengage from the charity model when addressing housing and other needs?

David: For me the answer would be to think about – and move our systems towards – viewing housing assistance as a right to which we are all entitled, rather than something that people have to prove themselves worthy for.

Katie: To me, one of the important pieces here is listening to people with lived experience, and authentically building relationships with people experiencing homelessness. We also need to work on our own individual and organizational anti-racism and be intentional about how we put that into practice every day. Working at the intersection of justice issues (environmental, racial, economic) will help to move us from being in a charity model to a justice model.

Q: How many people are we talking about (in homelessness or who otherwise need housing)? How many are families with children?

David: Hennepin County has ~53,000 households in deep poverty (<30% Area Median Income) and only ~18,000 units that are affordable to them. There is a gap of ~35,000 units of deeply affordable housing needed (for a mixture of families and single). We currently have ~250 families in shelter (including more than 500 children) on any given night. At the same time there are ~900 adults (including young adults) in shelter. Additionally, our last Point In Time (PIT) count found 487 people staying in places not fit for human habitation (outside, transit, vehicles, encampments etc.).

Jim note: For information about the PIT count, please visit www.wilder.org/mnhomeless

Katie: [A r]eminder that each number has a person behind it, fully deserving of love and dignity.

Q: Is there a role for citizens to make this kind of housing work at the County part of policy and official role and not just attached to leadership, which is temporary?

David: I can't really advise on lobbying the County! What I can say (just to provide factual information) is that setting a more formal responsibility would typically be designated by the

State. Of course, the County is your government and there are a variety of levels at which people can make their priorities known.

Katie: This is an area where the Constitutional Amendment [for Housing] initiative will be important. At the County level we could influence our Commissioners to make it part of Policy that we have commitments to housing (because as David noted the County technically could do nothing), and I think the City could also have a role here, especially as part of the 2040 plan policy.

Jim note: For information on the proposed Constitutional Amendment for Housing, visit mhponline.org/a-constitutional-amendment-for-housing

Q: What determines how someone moves from one housing situation to another?

David: So many things – what support do they have, what income do they have, any special needs, client choice – though always within the constraint of what is available, affordable and accessible...

Katie: It sometimes is determined by what they qualify for, what their income is, what diagnoses and supports they may have; it sometimes is program dependent. In my opinion the best options are those that give the person choice and autonomy to be in a setting that works best for them.

Q: What can we do to fight stigmas associated with homelessness?

David: Join with people experiencing homelessness. Lift up their voices and experiences. Beyond that, talk to people. Including – perhaps especially – those who may have different perspectives.

Katie: Get to know people who have experiences of homelessness, be open to connecting with them and coming from a place of non-judgment. Learn about homelessness. Encourage your friends and family to listen to stories that people with lived experiences of homelessness tell and think about what they would feel if they experienced that same thing (grow our empathy). Our Align Organizing Guides have great education components that could be helpful for this. (links to guides here: <https://www.alignmpls.org/organizingcampaign>)

Q: So the county is not required to work on homelessness.... Does a requirement exist at any level of government.... How is this handed in the locations outside of the US where you have lived?

David: No requirement exists that I am aware of, outside of the shelter-all policy Hennepin adopted for itself for families with children (similar exists in DC, New York and Boston). There is a duty to actually house (not just shelter...) families with children in the UK as well as an entitlement to rental assistance for anyone who cannot afford a local rent for as long as needed. These do not solve all the problems but they greatly reduce them, ensuring hundreds

of families and individuals aren't on the streets or in shelter for purely economic reasons (and allowing services to focus on those with deeper needs). I also lived in Cambodia but there is little government assistance there...

Q: I appreciate what was said about how the first three categories shouldn't exist (unsheltered, shelter, subsidized), yet isn't it true that if we valued income equality and wealth redistribution, we would also need "subsidized"? In other words, our fundamental economic system is diseased!

David: Allow me to offer a correction to myself: I was talking about (1) unsheltered (2) sheltered and (3) transitional housing! I absolutely believe subsidized housing must exist! There will always be people who – whether temporarily or on an ongoing basis – need assistance to meet the rent and I think subsidizing this need is the best way to end homelessness. I dislike on principle transitional housing (as well as unsheltered and emergency shelter) as a living situation because of its impermanence. People are still homeless (by definition) while staying there and still face the uncertainty of not knowing where they will live in the future. I believe everyone deserves the safety and dignity of a home!

Katie: I think this is a good point and worth noting that our current economic system is not equitable, largely due to many decades of discrimination. In order to counteract we need progressive policies that work to counteract the inequities we have created.