



AMHERST COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Housing is THE Solution to Homelessness

“El Porvenir:” The Future in San Telmo



Our intern Hannah Jin and one of her students at El Porvenir

The following is the first of a two-part series by Hannah Jin, one of our interns at ACC.

For the past 3 summers, I have had the opportunity to travel to a small rural village in Baja California, Mexico called San Telmo. There, I taught English at a school called El Porvenir, along with other electives such as art, dance, soccer, leadership training, and community service. Before this school and summer program were established, a local primary school was operating on minimal government support. Education was not prioritized. Instead of going to school, many children were

forced to work in farming camps from a very young age. Because of the lack of resources and money for many families, parents had their children working in the fields or staying at home to take care of their younger siblings as opposed to going to school. The cost of uniforms, lunch, books, and school supplies were all seen as unnecessary expenses in comparison to their need for food, water, and other basic necessities.

Many people in this community are stuck in the cycle of poverty. The exhausting work that the

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Amherst Community Connections
236 N. Pleasant Street, Amherst
413-345-0736

Walk-ins Mon.-Friday 8:30 am-12 pm; by appointment 12-5:30 pm.

“To empower, advocate for, and assist those in need”

families have to endure perpetuates the cycle of being dependent on alcohol, drugs, gangs, and financial instability. It keeps them in this life that does not offer any signs of hope or lasting joy. Many children are forced to work in the fields in order to serve as an additional source of income for their families. Financial instability makes this the only option available to survive. However, it is in the fields that children are exposed to this culture of alcoholism, drugs, and gangs. Girls are often forced to stay home to take care of their siblings and therefore are

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unable to attend school. Teenage girls between the ages 12-14 are even sold as young brides as a cultural practice and often done because of financial need. With this continuous cycle of poverty, addiction, and hopelessness many people in this community find themselves forced to work low-paying agricultural and harmful jobs due to their lack of education and family support.



The small, rural village of San Telmo

The vision of some people to raise up community leaders who would impact the larger community was the inspiration for a school called El Porvenir Primaria, founded in 2010. The school started with 60 students and has grown into a successful school, now serving over 120 students from grades 1-9 with a new addition of the Secondary School. All of the teachers are certified Mexican teachers with extensive teaching backgrounds and local to the community they serve. Prior to the addition of the secondary school, many of the students in the community typically only reached primary school as their highest level of education. The local secondary school was located miles away

from their community and transportation costs, financial difficulties, and household responsibilities made it impossible for students to continue education past primary school. However, the new addition of the Secondary School has provided an opportunity for the students to continue attending school past the primary level. The school's hope is for students now to achieve education past the secondary level and onto the university level!

After seeing how education has transformed this community and after being a part of it, I have decided to return to serve this community for the next 6 months from January to June. I am in need of a lot of support, so if you would like to partner with me on this journey, you can find out more about my trip and make any online donations at



The elementary school, El Porvenir Primaria

<https://4christmission.org/meethannah/>

Look out for March's edition of the newsletter to find out how I came to this life-changing decision!

Written by Hannah Jin

Meet the Team: Brian



Brian does casework and social media at ACC

I came to ACC because I felt that this would be a great opportunity to learn and develop important skills while being able to help those who need it. I am an Eagle Scout and deeply value serving the community. My experience in Scouting has given me an understanding of working in a nonprofit environment with a focus on helping others and service above self. I spent the past seven summers working to help run one of the premiere Boy Scout camps in the Northeast, Wah-Tut-Ca Scout Reservation in Northwood NH. The last two summers I spent there was in a top administrative position. That experience has given skills in graphic design and video editing skills and I am excited to take to ACC. This past summer, I assisted managing a local exterior house painting company that brought in over \$90,000 of revenue and taught me a great deal about the importance of hard work.

I have seen that homelessness is a serious problem in this area and ACC is a direct way to make a large difference in the lives of others. As a Communications and Political Science double major at UMass Amherst, I look forward to being able to expand and further the message to be able to do as much good as possible. I am excited to help create new forms of media to expand the good that ACC does.

In my free time, I am an avid musician and play bass guitar in a local band named Wax Harpoon. It is an all-original alt-rock sound; you can find us in the local bars in the area and providing entertainment for other student-run events. I hope to be able to enhance my writing and research skills as well, as any form of communication is essential to being successful in the professional world. When I graduate in May of 2018, I hope to apply the skills I have learned onto the campaign trail and try to work for a local political campaign, to further the good impact that I can make on society.

Shelter is Not the Solution to Homelessness

We know that homelessness is typically the product of a complex and interconnected set of circumstances, such as lack of affordable housing, substance use issues, unemployment, domestic violence, poverty, and more. Considering how challenging and nuanced the roots of homelessness are, why should we expect a simple and straightforward response to be adequate? The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) writes on their website, “For decades, Massachusetts reacted to homelessness with an emergency response. While shelter and emergency services have saved lives, they are not a long-term solution – and they are extremely expensive.”

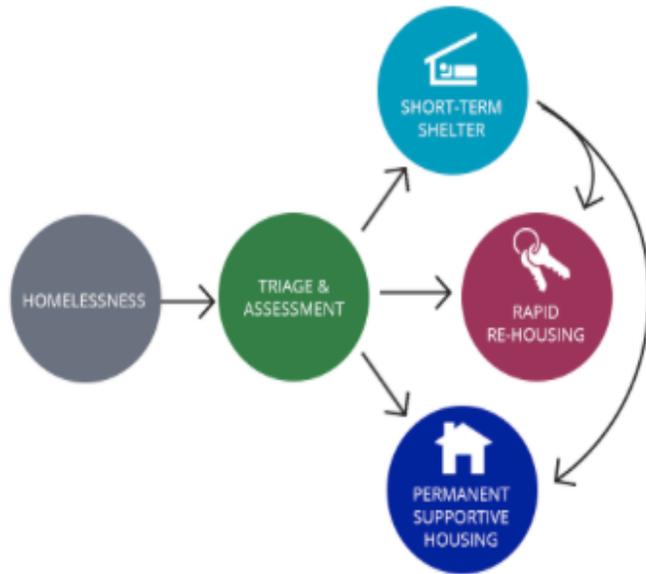
“For decades, Massachusetts reacted to homelessness with an emergency response. While shelter and emergency services have saved lives, they are not a long-term solution – and they are extremely expensive.”

They highlight that evidence is increasingly pointing to models of supportive housing as being more cost effective than homeless individuals staying on the streets or in shelters, since stability and additional access to

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support services decreases usage and cost of emergency medical services and incarceration. MHSA also emphasizes the need to transition the traditional emergency response to

shelter system result from failures of preventative measures and safety nets. For the remaining individuals, effective discharge planning and residential resources can end the



“revolving door” cycle of homelessness many individuals face. This is especially true for homeless individuals with disabilities, with Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services describing Housing First models as promising interventions:

“These non-linear

homelessness into a more comprehensive and coordinated effort - one that understands that the role of shelter for homeless individuals should only be part of the solution. They advocate for post-triage and assessment options including not only short-term shelters, but rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing as well.

housing and service models move the most disabled people directly to housing prior to treatment, and use the housing as the transforming element to support participation in

“Neighborhoods cannot continue to hold contentious meetings about homelessness in their streets and parks without then stepping up to see what they can do to create solutions...”

With the homeless population in Massachusetts growing, it has become increasingly important to better understand the most effective and creative interventions communities can offer. The approximately 80% of homeless individuals who are short-term users of the emergency

treatment.”¹ Finally, they highlighted the value of programs like the Individual Self Sufficiency Initiative (ISSI) for the average of 30% of homeless adults who work and need quicker access to the stability of

ACC’S MISSION

ACC’s mission is to empower, advocate for, and assist those in need. We strive to provide help with issues affecting individuals’ abilities to lead a stable and productive life. We can assist in...

- Disability Applications
- Housing & Job Searches
- Free Cell Phone Applications
- Food Stamps & Fuel Assistance
- \$ for rent, meds, utilities, etc.
- SSI/SSDI Benefits
- Debt/Credit Issues
- CORI issues *and more!*

permanent housing. ISSI provides individuals with short-term flexible rent assistance, totaling \$6000 over 12 months.

Reflecting upon our own local shelter system, we can look to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness article published in 2016 that lists several things to consider when examining the effectiveness of a shelter service within the community. One metric

for effectiveness is how well shelters link individuals to other resources and permanent housing options. Shelters must not work in a vacuum as temporary housing, but should be connected to other services and systems to fully

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resolve homelessness with long-term housing. One example is through efforts like coordinated entry and assessment, which helps the community identify and connect individuals in the shelter system to wraparound support services and information.

It is also vital that we remove any and all barriers to entry into permanent housing for the homeless, which includes diversifying the pathways we create out of homelessness. There may be some individuals who are simply not interested in moving to a shelter, so shelters should not be the only way to access support and resources to gain permanent housing. The Council instead suggests funding coordinated outreach teams to assist with coordinated entry and selecting the appropriate housing intervention for the individual.” Finally, expensive private housing markets like that of Amherst and its neighboring towns contributes to the lack of long-term affordable housing options to local residents. “Neighborhoods cannot continue to hold contentious meetings about homelessness in their streets and parks without then stepping up to see what they can do to create solutions – be it via their faith communities, as private landlords renting to people exiting homelessness, as vocal supporters of new housing developments, as volunteers in effective Housing First programs, or through many other ways they can help.”²

“Supported by such a broader community and neighborhood response, shelter can become a more effective and efficient part of a systemic response to prevent and end homelessness, no longer operating as individual or standalone programs, but functioning as part of a coordinated system of

programs working together to provide everyone with permanent housing solutions quickly.”³

Written by Beselot Birhanu

¹<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/researcher/basic-needs/housing/preventing-and-ending-homelessness.html>

²<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Coordinated-Entry-and-Victim-Service-Providers-FAQs.pdf>

³ Ibid.

Celebrating Successes of Housing First!

When we first reported to our readers about ACC’s Housing First program in the April 2017 newsletter, the initiative was 4 months underway. Hwei-Ling Greeney, Executive Director of Amherst Community Connections, was excited to share the successes of the program thus far and its far-reaching implications for this month’s Newsletter, over a year after the inception of the Housing First Program.



The Housing First program is a grant-based program with the ultimate goal of ending homelessness. Through a lottery-based system, three eligible residents of Amherst who have been experiencing chronic homelessness are the beneficiaries of the three housing vouchers. Once in the program, participants receive a range of supportive services at ACC aimed at building

the self-sufficiency needed to remain stably housed, responsible tenants of a private rental unit. In fact, individuals are required to come into ACC on a weekly basis to work on goals and plans of action aimed at successfully transitioning into stable housing. To enable our participants to focus on higher-order needs such as seeking higher education, employment, and vocational training, ACC strives to foster a

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support system that addresses fundamental priorities necessary to achieve these higher-order needs, such as access to mental health and substance use treatments.

Upon entering the Housing First Program, Sasha* had been living in an unheated camper in a campsite 2 miles into the woods while attending classes in a two-year certificate program at a community college. Sasha was able to secure temporary housing through the Housing First program and eventually sign a lease for a one-bedroom apartment. Today, she has obtained her Associate's Degree and has earned a full scholarship from one of the liberal arts colleges in the area to complete her Bachelor's Degree. Rather than having to compromise the attention afforded to meeting basic survival needs or to securing an education, the Housing First program made it possible for Sasha to fully focus on making



choices and taking steps to promote a self-sustaining lifestyle. Sasha no longer faces decisions about whether to allot energy into surviving or taking steps to eventually ensure a sustainable lifestyle. Now that she is housed she is able to address physical, emotional, and mental issues, with the support of ACC, which previously had to be put on the backburner.

David* had been homeless since the age of 15 and suffers from a rare medical condition that

requires weekly doctors visits and blood transfusions. He had been working full-time for an employer, but due to a lack of health insurance provided by his job, he requested to go down to part-time in order to be eligible for MassHealth. When his employer denied him, his alternative was to quit work to secure life-saving MassHealth coverage. Prior to his acceptance in the Housing First program, David was living in the woods and spending most of his winter daylight hours collecting wood for his wood stove in order to survive the nights. ACC helped David apply for housing and a job, write a resume and cover letter, and prepare for interviews. Now, at fifty years old, he is working part-time locally and contributing substantially to his

rent and is expected to receive a state housing voucher within the next six months.

The successes of

our Housing First participants are a testament to the long-term effectiveness of supportive housing models in tackling homelessness above and beyond the shortsightedness of an emergency shelter system. "Housing First makes sense," as Hwei-Ling Greeney said. "It saves taxpayers' money and it addresses chronic homelessness at its root cause--the lack of housing and lack of service support for our most vulnerable residents. The taxpayers of Amherst deserve a thank you and shout-out for funding this



FEBRUARY EVENTS

Wednesday, 2/7, 10 to 11:30 a.m. @ ACC, Belief, Rev. Christina Williams, First Cong. Church of Hadley

Wednesday, 2/12, 10 to 11:30 a.m. @ ACC, Starvos Inc.--Services for People with Disabilities, Jim Wolejko

Wednesday, 2/21, 10 to 11:30 a.m @ ACC, Smooth Moves--Dancercise, Pat Creaser

Wednesday, 2/28, 10 to 11:30 a.m. @ ACC, Can I Work if I am on SSI?, Winnie Siano

program!" We look forward to continuing to help our fellow Amherst residents exit the revolving door of homelessness.

**To protect the privacy of our participants, these are not their real names.*

Written by Daniella Colombo

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AmherstCommunityConnections.net