

Housing: A Human Right as a Norm for Housing First

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In this workshop I plan to do three things:

1. Talk about Housing as a Human Right in theory and practice.
2. Talk about Housing as a Human Right in religious traditions.
3. Make some concluding remarks from my Rochester, NY experience.

1. Housing as a human right in contemporary theory and practice.

For the past three winters, I have been a member of REACH¹, a community organization that opened and operated emergency shelters for the chronically homeless. Here I first learned about the Housing First movement and we incorporated this into our shelter's program. I witnessed the changes that came over our guests when they learned that they were on their way to permanent housing. I witnessed their increased sense of self-worth and had to ask myself why is housing not viewed more widely as a human right? Why do most people not see this? So, I invite you to explore with me how this idea of human rights has emerged in our public discourse.

We have become accustomed to speaking of any number of rights in the past one hundred years—women's right to vote, civil rights for all citizens regardless of race or gender, the right to marry regardless of gender and so on. The idea that human beings have rights is not new. This concept emerged in the seventeenth century when political philosophers, such as John Locke, changed the way we speak about our socio-political relationships moving the discourse from one of duty to that of rights. For the most part, prior to the seventeenth century, the rights and duties of humans were related to their social standing in a hierarchical society. Then the predominant focus was on obligation—the obligation owed by those in the peasant classes to those above them, and the obligation of the land-owning classes to their tenants, etc. But in the seventeenth century the idea that all human beings had inalienable rights that were prior to and independent of their social standing gained credence.

Indeed, this is the foundation for our own Declaration of Independence where our founders wrote, *we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (sic) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. The declaration goes on to say that it is the role of government to protect such rights.

This assumption that human beings have rights is prior to any legal codification of such rights. Indeed, such rights have become the *a priori* basis of most of our Western legal traditions. Such

¹ Rochesterians Engaged in Action for the Chronically Homeless

assumptions are at the heart of many of the wisdom traditions, which I explore in part two of this paper, and that help to shape our core values and the culture in which we practice these values. And, as we know, it has been and continues to be a long journey for the people of America to expand and defend the rights of all who live here.

While we are aware that US history has been one of extending human rights when did *housing* become a matter of human right? Not until quite recently in human history. It came with the industrial revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries. With the massive move to more urban patterns of dwelling, towns and cities established “poor houses” “or “work houses” for the indigent population, and later, for petty criminals, colonial servitude. In the early nineteenth century, when Rochester, NY, was one of the frontier towns of the westward movement, Colonel Rochester built small framed houses and offered free occupancy for six-months to tenants who would finish them. It was a way to encourage settlement in the then newly surveyed village. While later, in New York City workers found lodgings in crowded underground accommodation.

As industrialization progressed the importance of safe housing was recognized, and factory towns were built to house the employees of these newly urbanized regions. Over the course of the 19th century, as a result of disasters of either fire or disease, city corporations gained the authority to regulate the buildings that housed the poor. Several efforts were made to create public housing authorities in this early period, but these were frequently opposed by builders and Chambers of Commerce who were suspicious of any governmental interference with free enterprise. For much of this period housing was not thought of as a human right. Good housing was related to productivity, the better the living conditions the more productive the workers.

At the turn of the century a major factor in the creation of public housing was the urgent need to clear slums in our larger cities. Slums were seen as dangerous and unhealthy, especially for children. As we moved further into the twentieth century there were two schools of thought in the US. First was the utilitarian argument: Following the 1st World War, the idea of government providing or supporting, the right to safe shelter for working people grew throughout the industrialized world. In the US, Public housing programs began in the 1930's following the Great Depression. In order to sell the idea that government should be involved in housing for the public, the federal government focused on public housing as a way of effecting slum clearance and fostering social reform. It was especially concerned with the welfare of children who, living in slums, were thought to be deprived of any way of reaching their potential. Safe and affordable housing was good for the moral and physical well-being of the poor. Essentially this was a repeat of the prior century's utilitarian argument: building safe housing leads to better health, safer communities, and more productive workers.

During this first half of the past century some of the discourse about public housing was borrowed from European leftist ideas which held that government is responsible for public welfare and that housing was a public utility, similar to other public utilities. Such utilities are developed to meet the needs of the public, especially the working classes and require either governmental initiative or regulation.² For example the promise of Prime Minister Lloyd George of a “land fit for heroes” for the returning service men and women included public housing. The argument that safe and secure housing is seen as a right and has more of a deontological tone: It is grounded in a moral imperative not in valued consequences. Safe housing is necessary for human flourishing and government has a duty to care for all of its citizens equally. The need for affordable housing and/or assistance for the poor is a moral duty and not simply a utilitarian response to an economic need.

This second school of thought was embraced in the US during President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration. In his 1944 State of the Union address, President Roosevelt spoke of the right of every American to a decent home.³ The idea that shelter is a human right gained international support with the 1948 passing of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. It is interesting to note that Eleanor Roosevelt played a significant role in the writing of this declaration. Article 25 reads, *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing....* (emphasis added)⁴ Now the argument for public housing was based on what it takes for human dignity to flourish. The right to decent housing now had a *moral* imperative. Not based on productivity, but on the essential nature of what it means to be human.

In spite of growing support for public housing, what happened over the first half of the past century was complicated and not always successful. Public policies in these years often fostered segregated housing. For example, the Federal Housing Authority, established in 1934, as a way to foster home ownership, issued loan regulations that limited loans to “safe” neighborhoods. These policies help to create the white flight from our cities and build vast suburban housing around the city.⁵ Leaving cities with concentrations of African Americans in high rise apartments. It also deprived African Americans of the personal wealth gained in home ownership.

² Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2013). Kindle Book. p. 25ff.

³ ““Simply Unacceptable”: Homelessness and the Human Right to Housing in the United States 2011,” (Washington DC: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, June 2011). P.16

⁴ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” (1948), http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf.

⁵ See Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (New York, London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, A Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2017). Kindle Book.

In the 1950's a full assault by the real estate industry amidst current fears of communism led to a suspicion of anything smacking of socialist ideas and changed the public's view of government funded public housing.⁶ Indeed in 1952 Congress required that Public housing tenants take an oath of loyalty before taking up residence. There were two major consequences 1. Public Housing became a local concern administered (with federal money) by local Public Housing Authorities. 2. PHA's were now obligated to local city and regional politics and this placed even further pressure on just where public housing would be located as well as who would be eligible. These policies combined to make poverty invisible to suburban dwellers and to be concentrated among predominantly poor black and Latino families.

Consequently, in many cities in the US, public housing was built in those regions of the city already blighted by poverty and, coincidentally, the great northern migration of black families added to the stress on housing needs in those cities to which these migrating families were moving. As a result, concludes urban studies scholar Edward Goetz, "By the 1960's...public housing in the nation's largest cities had become the housing of last resort to an increasingly impoverished and marginalized African American population."⁷

Even with the advent of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 little changed in this pattern of segregated housing. There were few if any resources for enforcing this act and besides by then the social capital for owning a home had been predominantly among white families and the cost of owning a house was out of reach for poor African American families.

Another factor in the apparent failure of public housing was Congressional limitation on the cost of construction per unit. This often resulted in poor material and construction designs. While it offered short cuts in building, these policies helped to create public housing that was aesthetically sterile and a maintenance drain on local administrations.

In the mid part of the twentieth century a new theme associated with public housing emerged. Because of the widespread distrust of public housing as places of crime and drug abuse there were efforts to re-orient public housing into integrated neighborhoods. Some of this was accomplished by selling off public housing to private developers. At the same time, funding for public housing declined and so the net result was fewer numbers of publicly subsidized and affordable units were available to poor families.

Concurrent with these developments were the increasing rents expected of the tenants. Some relief came in 1968 with the Brooke Amendment limiting public housing rent to 25% of income. But in the long run the pressure on public housing pitted wages/income against rent limitations. Those with higher wages became ineligible and some were evicted. Public housing

⁶ Goetz, p.28 ff.

⁷ op cit p.7

became warehouses for the really poor, and with lower rental income, budgets for maintenance led to the depredation of many units of public housing.

This is not to say that all public housing is a total failure. Today there are 1.2 million Americans living in housing managed by some 3,300 public-housing authorities, many of which have received scores of 98 or higher out of 100 in HUD's public housing assessment system.⁸ But this is only a minor success in the housing of poor working families. In today's United States there is little talk of housing as a human right. In the absence of a fully funded public housing program the majority of poor working people find themselves subject to the rental prices of the market. It is estimated that currently *more than eight million extremely low-income renter households are severely cost-burdened, accounting for 72.6% of all severely cost-burdened renters in the country.*⁹ Added to this is the social and economic cost of serial evictions of people who fall behind in their rents as Matthew Desmond has dramatically reported in his recent book, *Evicted*.¹⁰ Joel Kunkler, who once worked for the Rochester Housing Council, told me recently that there are an average of 40 eviction cases each day in Rochester. All too often this is a pipeline to homelessness.

Ultimately the failure to fully fund programs of public housing has contributed to the systemic problem of homelessness in the US. The combined trends of rising rents and low wages led to many of the failures of public housing in the US. And it is no wonder, given the history of public housing, that by 2006 some "50% of homeless people are African American."¹¹ The issue of housing as a human right must now be voiced as also a matter of civil rights. What is needed is an urgent campaign to secure public funding for affordable housing for the working poor. But not just for the working poor, we have a large demographic of homeless people who struggle with mental and or addiction issues. These are the men and women in our shelters. By adopting a Housing First philosophy, local organizations working with the homeless afford their clients a far better chance of recovery and dignity than by simply maintaining them in shelters. Our small organization of REACH has in the past three winters placed over 40% of our guests into permanent supportive housing where many have flourished and learned to cope successfully with their challenges.

In the light of the current administration's comments concerning housing for the poor we need to become pro-active and lobby for a better and more humane understanding of what it means to see housing as a human right. Only recently we have had a report of the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Dr. Ben Carson, decrying the role of compassion in providing

⁸ Alana Semuels, "The Power of Public Housing," *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2015.

⁹ Andrew Aurand et al., "The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes," (Washington DC: The National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2017). p.5

¹⁰ Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016).

¹¹ "Simply Unacceptable" p. 22 -23

housing for the poor, advising providers not to “make housing for the poor too cozy.” It is another example of blaming the victim as programs like housing and meals come under the fiscal scrutiny of this administration.¹²

To combat this prevailing attitude, we will need to become advocates for housing as a human right, and in our case to re-enforce the concept of housing first as a cost effective and practical solution to the people we deal with through our agencies.

I want now to turn to resources faith communities have to foster campaigns for both affordable and supportive housing.

2. Housing as a human right in major religious traditions.

Prior to this era of human rights all major religious traditions spoke about how we care for the stranger in our midst. Codes of hospitality developed to express ways in which religious cultures care for those most vulnerable among them. As one scholar says, “Hospitality is a central and inaugural event in the world’s great wisdom traditions. It marks that moment when the self opens to the stranger...”¹³ I would now like to review the theme of hospitality in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Hospitality is central to the primary narrative that gives shape and practice as to what Jewish people understand about being a human community. In the complex Abrahamic tradition Abraham is seen as someone who, in obedience to God’s call was willing to leave his home and people and dwell in another land. There is a story of him welcoming three strangers into his tent (Gen. 18:1-33.) Abraham extends a radical and lavish welcome to these strangers. It is an image of someone who had left his own rooted origins and now lived as a nomad vulnerable to all around him, and who at the same time welcomed fellow travelers. Rabbi Jonathon Sachs notes that one interpretation of this narrative suggests Abraham asks God, with whom he had been meeting, to wait while he undertakes the welcome to the strangers. Sachs concludes, “Greater is the person who sees God in the face of the stranger than one who sees God in a vision of transcendence.¹⁴ Hospitality is central to his way of being.

In the Passover celebration, when Jews recall their lot as slaves in Egypt, families are reminded that, as they gather for their festive meal, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/us/politics/ben-carson-hud-poverty-plans.html>

¹³ Richard Kearney and James Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011). p.1.

¹⁴ Cited by Marianne Moyaert in “Biblical, Ethical and Hermeneutical Reflections On Narrative Hospitality” in Kearney and Taylor, pp. 98-99.

Egypt...” Lev 19:33 This idea of recalling their own existence as “strangers in a strange land” serves to shape the way they are expected to treat the stranger in their community.

Later in the Jewish liturgical calendar, the festival of Sukkot literally asks people to abandon the security of their homes and live in a temporary dwelling, symbolizing their sojourn in the wilderness. And what is more they are expected to welcome strangers as guests in this vulnerable state. What this tradition invokes in me is that perhaps, to meet the needs of the homeless, we need to somehow embrace our own fears of being without the comfort of home and hearth in order to welcome them into a safe place? One scholar has written: *The command to build a sukkah and live in it for a time each year reminds the Jews not only of their dependence on God and their status as guests but also of the obligation to extend the hospitality they have received to others, including strangers.*¹⁵ In short, this Jewish tradition reminds us that we are all guests, in the deepest sense of that word, and that our homeless brothers and sisters compel us to treat them also as guests.

Admittedly there is a paradox in Judaism. Central to the Jewish narrative is that of being a chosen people inhabiting a specific geography. They dwell in the “promised land”, they create homes and cities, they maintain an exclusive tradition, and they built a temple. But their later prophets and their poets never cease to remind them that they were “strangers in a strange land” and that the way they live toward one another and to their neighbors “would be a light to the world.” Possession is not everything. How we treat the widow, the orphan, and, we might add, the homeless is what truly makes a people.

As we turn to the Christian tradition I want to acknowledge another paradox. Much of the call to love our neighbor as ourselves (grounded in the Jewish origins of Christianity) is couched in language that is concerned with the self. For example, when Jesus speaks of the good folk who will go into eternal life as those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison, (Matthew 25:31 ff.) it is a way of life motivated by love for the other, but couched in the language of the salvific benefits to the believer. Similarly, an early Christian writer exhorts the reader to “show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Heb. 13:2) Here some kind of enlightened self-interest is the motive.

But on the other hand, if we look at the actual practice of Jesus in welcoming all kinds of people to his table we have a totally different picture. In fact, the primary liturgical practice of Christians is at the Eucharistic Table and this table must be understood in the light of Jesus’ behavior. Jesus became a scandal to the religious leaders of his time because he ate and sat with people who were considered to be outside the pale of respectability, like many of our

¹⁵ Hugh Cummins, “Sukkot: Levinas and the Festival of the Cabins” in Kearney and Taylor, p. 80

homeless people today. For most of his public teaching Jesus appears to be a homeless itinerant preacher who stayed with welcoming friends and supporters.

One scholar says that this central liturgical action of Christian liturgy, the Eucharist, is like the Passover meal, and “offers us a clue as to what God is up to in history ... catching us into the stream of God’s liberating history.”¹⁶ Unfortunately through most of history Christians have put barriers of separation around this liturgical rite. Jesus’ welcome of all comers was not shrouded in moralistic or doctrinal requirements; his table was a table of grace and forgiveness, and that is the central meaning of the Eucharist. When we take seriously the welcome Jesus offers to all, then all of us who come to this table come as those open to this radical welcome. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we learn hospitality at our altars of remembrance and we learn that in God’s eyes we are all guests at this table. The homeless stranger must be welcomed.

One of the best-known parables told by Jesus, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 – 37) is a tale that reflects existing cultural suspicion—Samaritans could not be trusted. The heart of Jesus’ teaching in this parable is not about the Samaritan, but answers the general question, what does it mean to be a good neighbor? To be a good neighbor is to ignore cultural and class distinction and to meet the neighbor just as he/she is. In this case a wounded man on the side of the road. Being a neighbor is to meet the other’s need as it is presented to us. In this case it was to bind the wounds and to find safe shelter. To be a follower of Jesus is to view our homeless brothers and sisters as our neighbors and give them shelter.

I turn now to Islam. I do not claim to be any kind of authority on Islam and will limit myself to accessible sacred texts as an indication of how this tradition views the call to be hospitable to the stranger.

Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity a common root in the Abrahamic narrative and extols Abraham’s quick and spontaneous hospitality toward his visitors. Indeed, such hospitality can be said to be at the heart of Islamic culture. Very early in the Qur’an basic rules for the social practices expected from believers is established:

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler... (2:177)

In short, a central practice of Islam is to share wealth and practice generosity to those in need. And in a later Surah we read:

¹⁶ Timothy Gorringer, *The Sign of Love: Reflections on the Eucharist* (London: SPCK, 1997). p.15

Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler... (4:36)

In each of these texts worship is related to right conduct in how we treat one another, including the needy among us.

And similar to both Judaism and Christianity, Muslims are reminded that they too are sojourners or guests on this planet:

Your Lord is sure to give you so much that you will be well satisfied. Did He not find you an orphan and shelter you? Did He not find you lost and guide you? Did He not find you in need and make you self-sufficient?

So do not be harsh with the orphan and do not chide the one who asks for help; talk about the blessings of your Lord. (Q.93:6-11)

And here is a Muslim statement made at the 2016 Interfaith Conference on Homelessness in Hawaii:

Islam's position towards homelessness is best embodied by a Hadith, which reads "He is not a Muslim who goes to bed satiated while his neighbor goes hungry" which coincides with another Hadith which reads "None of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself." There is a strong emphasis in Islam for Muslims to give for the sake of charity rather than for the sake of his or her ego. Muslims are instructed to give with such humility and sincerity that even the giver's left hand does not know what the right hand has given. Islamically, a person in need is not to be shamed, judged, or mocked for their lack of material items as is common in today's society.¹⁷

In summary, each of these religious traditions hold to the belief that every one of us is here as a guest; no one owns the earth and its bounty. What this means in practice is not that we treat the homeless as objects of charity, but as fellow guests on this planet. All of us as guests at the table of God's bounty have a part to play on how that bounty is shared. How we treat our neighbor is central to any idea of faithful living. To declare housing as a human right is one way to give political capital to this central notion of hospitality to the other.

But herein lies the challenge. In my experience faith communities are far more comfortable with doing works of charity and reluctant to get into the work of advocacy. In my own

¹⁷ "Hawai'i Faith Based Summit on Homelessness," https://ihshawaii.org/documents/Faith-Summit-on-Homelessness-Full-Program_FINAL1.pdf. This extract is from a statement prepared by Imam Ismail Elshikh and Hakim Ouansafi of the Muslim Association of Hawai'i.

community as I am sure in yours we can point to many places where the work of mercy is being done. But for faith communities to become partners in the housing first movement we have to encourage them to take on two further steps: first, to become institutional supporters of Supportive Permanent Housing by being instrumental in acquiring or re-purposing property to provide this kind of housing and to do so in a manner that is not subject to market forces. This will take communities of faith into the realm of property development and provision of services necessary for people making changes in their lives.

Secondly, communities of faith need to take on the role of advocacy so that they can help to change the politics of housing in this nation. And that is no easy task. Lawrence Adams in a book entitled *Going Public* has drawn from survey data to show that faith communities are more focused on personal formation and action and less concerned about the shaping of public policy.¹⁸ We are in what he calls a “post Christendom” understanding of the public realm. On the other hand, he argues that faith communities can offer training in the practice of civil discourse and in this way can become effective voices in the quest for a moral basis to our public life. And to do this we need to find our voices in the public square in such a way as we join collaboratively with other religious voices to establish a moral tone to the question of public housing. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf believes that communities of faith can be encouraged to speak with their own voices in the shaping of this public conversation. He argues that “an authentic religious experience should be a world shaping force.”¹⁹ Not as a matter of coercion but as voices of conscience in a genuinely pluralist society. Voices that are not bound one any one ideology, be it secular or religious.

There is much to be done to encourage this. Recently I was speaking with a priest who is leading a large congregation in Rochester and told me that he could not even use the term “public policy” from the pulpit for fear of dividing the congregation! People of the housing first movement will need to find ways to promote the movement in a non-partisan manner in order to equip people of faith with strategies for making this movement one that is shaping public conversations and decisions concerning our homeless men and women who share the status of being guests on this tiny planet. On the screen is a short list of what we could do to educated members of faith communities as we invite them to become advocates for housing as a human right.

I am aware that many faith-based communities have been involved in the creation of permanent supportive housing using Federal dollars. But my perception is that the bulk of Federal dollars for subsidized housing has gone to the for-profit developers providing for a set

¹⁸ Lawrence E. Adams, *Going Public: Christian Responsibility in a Divided America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002). p.13, pp. 57 ff.

¹⁹ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

aside of affordable units. The problem with this is that these units become subject to market prices and more importantly for-profit housing developers do not maintain the support services needed by the population we are concerned with. In an article on the non-profit sector Rachel Bratt makes the following observation:

Empirical evidence suggests that community-based development organizations (which include CDCs) work to empower the poor and respond to community concerns. In particular, these organizations have demonstrated that local decision-making processes can become more open and accessible to community members, who, in turn are able to set a neighborhood development agenda, rather than this being done by the business community (Rubin, 1993, 106). In addition, researchers at the Urban Institute have found compelling evidence of community leadership and strong alliances both inside and outside CDCs' neighborhoods (Walker, 2002, 35).²⁰

In short, there needs to be more advocacy for funding of non-profit housing developments.

3. Concluding notes from a Rochester, NY, experience.

I have examined the current failures of public housing in the US and how this factors into the question of homelessness. In spite of our nation being a signature to the UN Declaration of Human Rights we have a long way to go before we can say that all Americans have access to affordable and accessible housing.

The wisdom embodied in our faith traditions provide a vital source for members of these faith communities to hold our current public practices to a higher standard. By reminding us that the homeless are our neighbors religious wisdom demands that we treat housing as a human right.

Four years ago, the City of Rochester bulldozed a tent city of homeless people. The destruction included the loss of many personal items and belongings. Several leaders in the faith communities then established an emergency shelter that came to be known as Sanctuary Village where these homeless people were housed for the remainder of the winter. Sanctuary Village was housed in an old vacant factory building donated by a generous owner. In the following spring of 2015 a public meeting was called and over 120 people said, "never again" will homeless people be treated in this way. And so, REACH (Rochester Emergency Action Committee for the Homeless) was born. At the time REACH agreed to work on an emergency shelter for the winter of 2015-16 in anticipation of an expansion into a new building for the House of Mercy, a longstanding low-barrier shelter in Rochester. It was during this time that many of us learned for the first time about the Housing First movement. We worked diligently to support a social work team as a crucial part of our emergency shelter and were successful in placing 40% of our residents into permanent supportive housing.

²⁰ Rachel G Bratt, "Should We Foster the Nonprofit Housing Sector as Developers and Owners of Subsidized Rental Housing?," in *Revisiting Rental Housing: A National Policy Summit, November 2006* (Joint Center for Housing Studies Harvard University, 2007).

We thought that REACH would go out of business at this stage, but the new House of Mercy was not ready for occupancy and so we repeated our effort in 2016-17 with a commensurate commitment to following a housing first philosophy. And then this past year one of our leading social workers asked us to this a third time as the numbers indicated a real need. And we did. We have been able to do this in large part by the amazing support we have been given from the faith communities of Rochester. Each winter we have raised about \$30,000 to \$40,000, which along with County re-imbursements has allowed us to care for over 150 men and women in the past three winters, placing many of them in supportive housing.

What is important to note is that REACH Home has been the only low barrier shelter in the Rochester area practicing a Housing First philosophy. Each new guest is immediately seen by one of our social work team who administers the VI-SPDAT²¹ to assess their housing potential. What we try to build at these temporary shelters is a sense of community. This is enhanced by the many faith communities who bring in our evening meals. Often relationships are formed in these visits and enable our guests to have a sense of self-regard in meeting these providers.

But REACH, now standing for Rochesterians Engaged in Action for the Chronically Homeless, does not want to continue this band aid work on behalf of the homeless. We are planning to incorporate as a charitable organization under New York State law and explore ways to develop our advocacy program along four avenues:

1. Rehabbing houses for the homeless—a kind of Habitat for Humanity model. We are currently in conversation with the City to acquire our first home.
2. Repurposing a church building by converting it into permanent supportive housing. We are currently in conversation with a local church.
3. Tiny Homes project. Some of our members are actively exploring ways to implement a Tiny Homes project in our city.
4. Advocacy in our faith communities for housing justice and participating with the Housing Services Network by advocating for Housing First initiatives

²¹ Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool, OrgCode Consulting Inc

Discussion Questions

- What challenges do you face in your city/town in the creation of permanent supportive housing?
- What role do you see local communities of faith playing in this challenge?
- What is the most important thing your agency can do to promote a conversation about housing as a human right?

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