



THE ENCAMPMENT



Teresa Neumann, MA

CENTER FOR URBAN RESEARCH AND LEARNING, LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

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The Encampment

I'm not in a tent, you know. It's easier to get up from bed than it is from the ground. And at 61, you know, that's important. ... To be inside means my sister can bring my stuff, which is a universe of change. Just a universe. (Diane)

Diane¹ is proud of her home. It's not just that it actually has walls, a kitchen, and no threat of rain, rats or unwanted guests. What she's happiest about, and what makes this apartment a *home*, is to be able to hang *her* things on *her* wall in *her* home.

Getting here hasn't been easy. The path was neither straight, nor smooth, nor secure.

Diane - just one year ago - was living with others in a tent, under a viaduct, under Lake Shore Drive. Now she's in her home.

Lake Shore Drive, observed to be one of the most beautiful roads in the United States, provides not only an important thoroughfare to Chicago drivers but its bridges also afford shelter to homeless Chicagoans. While many people have slept under the viaducts of Lake Shore Drive over the years, it was not until the summer of 2015 that the appropriate city officials became widely aware of the tents cities. The predominate camps popped up on the Northside underlining the viaducts of Irving Park, Montrose, Wilson, Lawrence, and Foster. These tent communities under the viaducts became known by many names including "the encampment."

This narrative seeks to tell the stories of the journey from the encampment to permanent housing; the perspectives are by former encampment residents who participated in the city's Chronic Homelessness Pilot project. In partnership with the Center for Housing and Health (CHH), the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University Chicago (CURL) interviewed 10 participants during their placement in temporary housing units. This housing – often in the form of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) quarters – was typically the second phase in the three-phased pilot. To capture the full experience of the move to permanent housing, researchers followed up with four of the original 10 participants approximately one month after they moved into their permanent housing. The majority of interviewees were in their 50s and 60s. Some had previously held professional jobs, while others had been low-skilled laborers. All of them had been living under the viaducts for an extended period of time.

At the time of the writing of this article, only one participant of the 75 remains unhoused. 55 have received housing and 19 are inactive (i.e. moved on, incarcerated, living in a nursing home or otherwise no longer participating). By all measurements, this is a success. This is not, however, simply a story about numbers; it's a story about a collaborative program that has made "a universe of change". This pilot

¹ "Diane" is a pseudonym as are all other names of participants in this document.

Michael, 33

Michael was born and raised in Chicago, moved away, and found himself back in town without a home after a bad breakup.

His new, permanent studio became his “own personal safe haven” where he can figure out what he needs to do in order to live in the world.

He spoke of his hopes to find outdoor work, hopefully construction. He also wants to give back and be an “almanac” for the homeless: “Now that I know how it goes I can teach and pass it along and all people got to do is what I did: Stay on top of your business. You got to put the footwork in. It’s here but it’s not going to fall in your lap. You have to get up and get it.”

dramatically helped some people experiencing homelessness in Chicago, and, more importantly, it points to ways in which we can more systematically help others.

Street homelessness in Chicago is a dire problem. According to the 2016 Homeless Count and Survey, there were about 5,889 people experiencing homelessness in Chicago. 79% (4,646) were located within shelters and 21% (1,243) were unsheltered on the streets, parks and other places not meant for human habitation, including the viaducts under Lake Shore Drive.

In order to address increased pressure from multiple stakeholders in and around the northern most viaducts of Lake Shore Drive, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced in April of 2016 a pilot project with the goal of permanently housing 75 people living under the viaducts by early July 2016, three months after the announcement. A local collaboration of social service agencies, advocates, city agencies and elected officials worked to incorporate lessons learned from the Ending Veterans Homelessness Initiative (EVHI)² coordination model.

During two nights in April, eight outreach teams assessed 75 individuals under the aforementioned viaducts. About a quarter of the participants required short term help while the remaining 75% required long term services to remain stably housed. Outreach teams made clear that the assessment and participation in the pilot was voluntary.

The Housing First model drove the structure of the pilot. Its goals are to place people experiencing homelessness in housing as quickly as possible and offer them voluntary

supportive services as needed. The process of housing participants took place in three phases: 1.) assessment of need and eligibility for the pilot; 2.) placement in bridge units (short-term units); 3.) and, finally, placement in a permanent unit.

In 2016, the city of Chicago through the Department of Family and Support Service, provided a total of \$280,000 in additional funding to support system coordination work and supportive services, including three social workers housed at Deborah’s Place, Inner Voice, and Heartland Health Outreach (HHO). They also funded an innovative aspect of the model to serve frequent visitors to the HHO Health Center who had serious health conditions.

² Ending Veterans Homelessness Initiative (EVHI) <https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/fss/veterans/policy-advocacy-initiatives/evhi.html>

The city and agencies committed to housing participants on the Northside of the city because most participants expressed their interest and desire to remain in the community; it had been their home for years. The Northside also has a high concentration of social services agencies, resources, and public transportation. Many participants were not familiar with other parts of the city or felt unsafe in neighborhoods in which they previously resided. Participants' reasonable desire to stay on the Northside came into conflict with the realities of the private rental market in the area. The south and west sides of the city generally had more affordable housing available and landlords willing to participate in the project.

This proved to be a daunting task, even with the additional allocation of resources and the will of both agencies and participants to find suitable housing quickly. One of the largest delays in the pilot's timeline was caused by the challenge of convincing landlords to take the risk of offering a lease to a person who had a history of chronic homelessness and completing a long application process to receive rent subsidies for that tenant.

The pilot depended upon multiple subsidies to fund the temporary and permanent units. The Chicago Low Income Housing Trust Fund (CLIHTF) and Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) committed over 80 subsidies to the pilot. CLIHTF provided half of the subsidies and the CHA provided the other half with a few additional subsidies that made up a smaller portion. CLIHTF subsidies were immediately available to the pilot but could only be used if individual landlords applied to receive CLIHTF subsidies for their units. This included a lengthy application process and limited monetary incentives to encourage participation. This proposition was especially unattractive to landlords given how easy it is to currently find less complicated tenants and the perception that the rent subsidies were too low given the current tight rental market on the Northside.

In order to address landlord recruitment challenges, the Mayor's office, with the support of Chicago Aldermen, drafted a letter addressed to Chicago landlords requesting their help with the initiative and asking them to complete an online survey about available units and application information. Over one hundred landlords responded to this survey but only four of them had units on the Northside, the preferred area of Pilot participants. In addition to that, the Center for Housing and Health and their subcontractors individually contacted over 200 landlords in their housing portfolio and facilitated in-person meetings with a number of Northside property management companies. However, very few of the contacted landlords agreed to work with the Pilot and submit applications for the available subsidies.

In order to receive a CHA subsidy via Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers – a subsidy attached to a person and not a unit – certain qualifications must be met and included a long application process as well. Additionally, the vouchers were not made available to the pilot participants until mid-November, a full seven months after the initial assessment in April. This substantially slowed the timeline to place participants in permanent units.

To fill the gap between living outside and receiving a permanent unit, participants lived in temporary units referred to as "bridge" units. Single Room Occupancy units (SROs) often functioned as the temporary units participants were placed in as the slow process of securing permanent units was completed. The conditions of these units were, at times, below the standards that agencies would have preferred but given the lack of high quality temporary units in the city, this was often the best option available.

LIFE UNDER THE VIADUCT

“It’s hard!”

Simple survival was *the* primary objective for those living under the bridges. The daily stressors involved the basics of life: finding a meal, a shower, a place to use the bathroom; keeping themselves and their belongings safe; keeping the rats out of their tent; and most importantly, keeping warm during Chicago winters. Exposure, by every definition of the word, was the constant challenge. The physical exposure of being outside left their belongings susceptible to floods under the viaducts after a heavy rain. During the winter, many experienced frostbite. And then there was the physical toll of sleeping on the cement and never being able to stand up inside the tents. Residents shared tents with others that required climbing over someone. Sleeping under the bridges was an assault on their ears, too. It exposed them to every sound in and around Lake Shore Drive: loud car stereos, the never-ending “ka-chunk, ka-chunk” of cars passing overhead, and arguments among the others living in the tents next door.

The mental and emotional exposure of living under the viaduct provided “a front row seat to all the ills of society.” It was hard to tell who was outside their tents, forcing people to live in a constant state of hyper-awareness of their surroundings—a taxing state of existence physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The community of fellow viaduct residents was, for many, both a blessing and a curse. Interviewees spoke of both comradery and conflict. Theft was a common problem: “If it’s not nailed down, it has a tendency to walk off.” An interviewee was beaten by a fellow resident and was admitted to the hospital for her injuries. Another woman spoke of having a golf club for protection that she used on occasion. One resident, reportedly a former gang member, was trying to “run the place.”

While the stories of these conflicts were part of the interviews, they were the minority of stories shared about fellow residents. Cooperation was a much more common experience.

A sense of community in an “unorthodox” place

Different viaducts had slightly different cultures. The folks living under the Foster overpass spoke of a council they formed to decide who could join them in the encampment. They also created an advanced system of waste disposal under the viaduct in order to keep it cleaner. Groups of friends built trust among each other and would watch one another’s’ belongings. Under other viaducts, watch systems

Diane, 61

Diane is in her early 60s, a couple years from her pension working in the technology section of an accounting firm.

In an unlikely turn of chance, she found Benny while living under the viaduct. The two plan to be married in the near future.

Diane was grateful, excited and relieved to receive a permanent unit with Benny. She gushed about her future cooking and baking extravaganzas with the return of her cookbooks and stand-up mixer.

Diane planned to wear clothes she had in storage instead of donated clothes she’d acquired while homeless. With a smile she said, “I’m not going to be wearing jeans for a little while. I don’t think anybody...I think I’ll surprise everybody how I normally dress.”

were set in place so that someone was always on the lookout for theft or unwanted visitors. Some men kept an eye on certain women who were their friends to make sure no one bothered or harassed them. They also protected one another from violence. “It felt like family” under the bridge.

Generosity of strangers

All the viaducts’ residents spoke of divvying up donations of food and clothing among everyone so that nothing was wasted and no one froze. They often had more donations than they needed and more food than they could eat and the residents expressed deep gratitude for the donations: “The lesson in disguise is that Chicago cares. We care about each other. We just have a funny way of showing it.” Couples who lived nearby visited regularly and asked what everyone needed:

“There was a guy in there named Victor and his wife Carmen. And they came by in the middle of the winter one night, and they took a list down on everybody’s shoe size, and size of this and size of this. And they went to Target, and they blew a thousand bucks on clothes for us. Everyone got a pair of boots.”

Donations flooded in as tents, food, army cots, propane heaters, gas grills, sleeping bags, outerwear, boots, chairs and plenty of clothes. Participants spoke of a man named Santana who drove an old ice cream truck and dropped off donations weekly to the residents. People came from far and wide – some as far as Indiana – to help provide some comfort to those living under the viaducts.

Further assistance required

Even with the generosity of strangers and agencies and survival tactics practiced by the residents, these forms of shelter lacked both sustainability and safety. The viaducts required organization and organized solutions.

TRANSITIONING FROM TENTS TO TEMPORARY UNITS

“I feel at home, finally. I mean, I can stand up without having to bend over the side of the tent. I can actually go to the bathroom. You know I can cook some food, besides firing up the grill.”

April Assessment

During two nights in April 2016, outreach workers set up tables under the viaducts, brought food and drink, and asked those who were interested to sign up to be part of the pilot program that promised a pathway to permanent housing. Outreach workers asked the residents a series of questions about how long they had been under the viaducts, where else they had lived and what services they had been receiving. They also asked about mental health, physical health and additional support services they might need including addiction treatments.

When asked about that night in April, interviewees spoke about their suspicion of the social service workers coming in and making promises of housing. They felt they had heard this line before. Others, while suspicious, took a “wait and see” approach toward the pilot. They signed up, held out some marginal hope that someone would deliver on their promises and did their best to comply with the program in order to participate. One participant saw it as a markedly different offer than he previously received. When asked what it felt like when this process started, he responded,

“Like someone cared, you know? ... It’s not a hand out, it’s a hand up because they were asking us if we wanted help. If you want it, sign up and take it. It’s a hand up, not a ‘you-have-to-sign-here-or-get-the-hell-out-of-here.’”

Another participant remembered the hope he felt knowing that there was a good chance he wasn’t going to have to spend another winter outside. Having a place all his own where he could stay warm and dry was looking more promising.

The process begins

One of the sole critiques that interviewees had about being part of the pilot was the slow pace of the process. The city initially promised to house the 75 participants in the pilot (either in temporary bridge units or in permanent units) by July 2016. This did not come to fruition for a multitude of reasons. One of the largest reasons was the lack of appropriate units – both bridge and permanent – available to the agencies tasked with finding housing. Another challenge was the dearth of documentation participants were required to provide to prove their identities, income, homelessness status, social security numbers, etc. Outreach workers and clients spent the initial weeks and months of the pilot simply replacing lost or stolen markers of one’s identity.

On top of a lack of documents, many participants in the pilot project had additional barriers that typically cause challenges to finding conventional rental units. They had issues such as felony records, a previous eviction, chronic health issues, chronic mental health issues - including active addiction, and a simple lack of basic income.

“But no, yeah, it’s normal living so far. Except for some of the crazy nuts slamming their doors and screaming at four in the morning. No big deal.”

Housing in temporary bridge units

The conditions of the SRO bridge units often left interviewees disappointed in the quality of the buildings. One building had an especially bad reputation among the interviewees. They spoke of bed bugs, cockroaches, dirty shared bathrooms and interpersonal conflicts that carried over from the viaducts among residents housed in the same building. Participants also noted that residents of the SROs with severe mental health challenges made for very challenging neighbors and living environment. No interviewee spoke of feeling settled there. The lack of a real kitchen or full privacy (e.g. having to share a bathroom) still wore on the participants and caused ongoing stress. In the same way that rats had been a

Benny, 53

Benny grew up in Edgewater, attended elementary school at Swift and high school at Senn and Sullivan. He was on the football team and the swim team.

For the next 20 or so years, Benny was an independent contractor; he painted, plastered, and did electric work.

Now that Benny shares a permanent unit with his partner Diane, he hopes to go to school and receive a culinary degree so that he might give back by cooking at local soup kitchens.

He still goes back to the viaducts to see his friends who were not part of the pilot.

When asked what benefit the pilot provided, Benny said, “I’m proud again...actually got a key in my hand that opens a door... and there’s no zipper on it.”

challenge under the viaducts, bed bugs and roaches became the new vermin that required strategic avoidance and abatement.

Yet, even with the bad reviews of the accommodations and lingering interpersonal conflicts, interviewees had positive reviews of the benefits the units provided. They spoke of the ability to finally begin to relax in a place they could call their own with a lock and key. It was a place to watch TV for the first time in a long time and a place to finally store books. “Compared to the viaduct, it’s heaven!” The interviewees most appreciative of the unit were those that viewed it merely as a temporary place. They figured that if they could put up with living outside, they could handle this unit for a few months. Patiently waiting was the hallmark of their time spent in the temporary units.

Where to move next?

The vast majority of residents expressed a strong preference to remain on the Northside in or near Uptown. Interviewees spelled out the reasons for these preferences: “Even though I crab about Uptown, I’m going to miss it because I know where everything is. I can eat over there...I can go to the bathroom over there!” They knew where and how to find resources. When asked about what they would do if offered a unit on the south or west sides of Chicago, one participant said, “You might as well offer me a unit in another city.” Most never lived on those sides of town, knew no one there, and knew it would be much harder to find needed resources. Stable supportive housing did not guarantee income, a Link Card or a CTA pass. With their current lives full of transitions and uncertainties, moving to an unfamiliar part of town was simply not an option.

The waiting game and the trust game

The timeline promised in April shifted but a consistent sense of hope and persistence on the part of interviewees remained clear. Interviewees trusted their outreach workers and case managers to persevere and find permanent units despite the slow timeline. Due to challenges stated earlier, pilot participants waited for permanent units for much longer than initially planned, but were summarily satisfied when they received a home.

A PLACE TO CALL MY OWN

A: “It’s too good.

Q: Too good?

A: Yeah I never expected anything like that when they said we were going to have housing.

Q: What did you expect?

A: Something a little shabbier, a little lower on the rung.

Q: Like not stainless steel appliances and original wood doors?

A: No, no, not at all. You know, I figured it’d be one of those tiny little matchbox one bedrooms. But it’s not. The bedroom is spacious.”

Richard, 58

Richard grew up in DuPage County and has lived in Uptown for the past 30 years.

Well connected as an employee of the Cook County Treasurer, Richard served as a property tax auctioneer and learned how to navigate large bureaucratic structures in order to get things done. This served him well in navigating the process of finding permanent housing.

When asked what he thought about his permanent unit, he said, "I got everything I wanted. Everything.... I don't ever plan to move again... I'm happy to go home."

The payoff

Something that is hard to capture fully in words is the marked difference in demeanor participants presented between the first interview that took place while participants lived in bridge units and second interview that took place approximately a month after participants moved into their permanent units. During the second interview, even before being asked a single question about their new homes, their physical presence was more relaxed, less stressed, and generally happier. They smiled easier, made more eye contact and even laughed. As they received their permanent homes, they shifted their narrative from cautious optimism about eventually receiving a permanent unit to a hopeful excitement about their futures. Diane, a woman in her early 60s, stated that having a place has been "surreal." She found herself in disbelief; the place was beyond her dreams of what the pilot would produce. All interviewees explained what excited them most about their new units: the physical nature of a home; its social function; and its impact on mental health and, therefore, their personal potential.

Walls, a kitchen, a lock

The units became a personal space that none of them named as missing in the first interview, however, by the second interview they each gushed with gratitude for the privacy and value it added to their lives. They spoke of their excitement of hanging their own artwork on their

walls again. They moved their dressers where they wanted them and then moved them again just because they could. They now had the creature comforts of old recipe books and pots and pans to cook their favorite recipes or the joy of looking forward to flipping through an old photo album not seen in years. These walls, kitchens, and private spaces provided them a place for self-expression, creativity, and a respite from outside world.

I can have guests and I can be more selective about my company

The viaducts hosted an "unorthodox" sense of community and that community remained. After they left the viaduct, community and relationships changed. Michael reported that his relationships with those still under the viaduct had shifted; they started treating him differently, as though he had abandoned them. He knew that was not true and reflected that since he reached a different point in his life it was time to find more friends also trying to better themselves. Diane and Benny, a couple who met and fell in love under the viaduct and plan to marry, hosted a turkey dinner for Christmas and were overjoyed to host their old friends from the viaduct and offer them a place to stay for a couple nights. Richard, who freely admitted his tendency to bend rules, was "very content" to be in a place with fewer restrictions on who he could or could not allow in his unit -- a privilege he was not allowed in previous living environments or his SRO unit. He found the "common sense" rules applied to his unit were freeing and

reasonable. Richard, Benny and Diane all also looked forward to having pets in their new units as an additional form of companionship, freedom, and self-expression.

Freeing up mental space to work on oneself

Mental relief presented as a clear benefit of participants living in a new home: “A lot of weight of worrying about where we’re going to sleep, are we going to be warm enough, what are we going to eat. I just go to the kitchen. So yeah, instead of worrying about Diane freezing to death...and now not no more.” Benny and Diane both reported that having their own place together gave them the mental and emotion space to create and follow through on long-term goals including going back to school, and volunteering at a local soup kitchen. Interviewees also experienced better sleep. Michael spoke of the benefits of independent support he found in a place all his own:

A: “I’ve been given the tools to do for myself because I have my own unit. That’s when I can go back home, like okay, I need to regroup, I need to rethink this and then go back out there and try it again. I’m more protected, more sheltered; I don’t have to...a lot of things have been alleviated. Like wondering who’s walking past the tent, or dealing with rats, you know, so a lot of things have been taken away. That opens up more room for productive things. ... So a lot of things that I don’t have to worry about.

Q: And that’s probably why you’re feeling better?

A: A whole lot better.”

WHY THIS WORKED, WHAT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

The fruits of the labor

The Systems Integration Team (SIT) facilitated by CHH and comprised primarily of service providers, with representatives from the Department of Family and Support Services, made this pilot work. The SIT is a collaborative model that brought together intensive housing case managers and outreach workers to coordinate care and monitor participant progress. Through ongoing skills sharing and peer support, the SIT enhanced the capacity of participating agencies to address the complex needs of people who were living under the viaducts. Participants bestowed praise upon outreach workers in virtually every interview. In the eyes of the participants, the compassion, understanding, patience and thorough work done by the team of case managers and outreach workers, got them out from under the viaduct. When asked why these outreach workers made them feel so supported, one respondent stated, “Their heart, their body, their souls are in it.” The participants saw outreach workers as allies emotionally invested in their work who would “go the distance for you.” A man shed tears when asked about the support he received throughout the pilot: “Don’t be bringing me to tears... I’m not crying, my eyes are sweating.”

Participants also recognized that this experience of receiving help from social service agencies was markedly different from their previous experiences. They recognized the value and unique cooperation of the team that worked to house them. They had a team behind them, showing them the steps to find a home. Previous experiences consisted of empty promises and unfulfilled hopes of stable housing. One participant recognized that this time the service providers had “clout,” the required power to tackle the challenge of housing encampment residents.

Keen understanding of the larger systems at play

Participants knew this process was a pilot designed as a team model of cooperation among service providers. They also understood themselves as “guinea pigs” in this pilot. While they praised the help they had received, some interviewees reported that other participants experienced case managers who were inconsistent and did not follow up as they had promised or were not inclined to find clients housing on the north side. They feared that some of the “interactions between the case managers and clients [were] totally uneven.” Participants also perceived that the roll out of the pilot might have been driven, at least initially, by “vague generalizations.”

Participants also understood that the system required their willful and consistent participation. They spoke of the importance of keeping appointments, being in contact with their case managers and cooperating with the limited hoops they were asked to jump through in order to be part of the pilot. One participant compared the process he had experienced to a game of toppling dominoes. He saw the dominoes set up and as long as he kept up his end of the bargain in the process, he experienced the dominoes lining up into place.

Future hopes

The future hopes and dreams of participants of this pilot project were as profound and as mundane as any Chicagoan’s hopes for their own future: a place to get a good night’s sleep; the chance to have some space to make art; the opportunity to keep a doctor and get necessary medication; the opportunity to have a job; the chance to go back to school; and a little bit of space to call their own. These Chicagoans wanted the opportunity to express themselves and find dignity and productivity in their communities again. Their hopes are our hopes and the hopes of future efforts to find permanent and supportive housing for Chicagoans across our city.