

**Confronting Homelessness in Washington, D.C.**

Ben Roberts, Foundry United Methodist Church.

*The issue of homelessness has generated increased attention in Washington, D.C. recently. In February Mayor Muriel Bowser unveiled her plan to replace the homeless shelter at D.C. General with smaller shelters throughout the city, a proposal that has received some pushback from many over issues such as perceived costs. The debate occurs against the backdrop of the recent news that the number of homeless families in the city has increased 30 percent over the past year.*

*Ben Roberts, Associate Pastor and Director of Social Justice Ministries at the Foundry United Methodist Church, has been active in working to address homelessness in the nation's capital through Foundry and the Washington Interfaith Network. Spotlight recently spoke with Roberts to better understand the issue of homelessness in the city and how to address these challenges here and in other parts of the country. The conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

**What are the primary drivers of the rise in homelessness – especially among families – in Washington, D.C.?**

Like most of the homeless issues within the city there are a number of factors. For families it is a range of things from affordable housing and increasing housing prices to good jobs, a lot of folks in shelters are working but are unable to afford rent.

There has also been a lack of smart investments by the city to address this issue earlier. We had a number of years under previous mayoral administrations where we didn't have emergency winter plans in place until it was December. At this point the law that we have to shelter folks took over, and once we fill up our shelters it gets harder to effectively move people back into permanent housing. It kind of snowballed on us to the point where we are now, where you are looking at over 300 homeless families at different points of the year when it peaks.

**Can you talk about Mayor Bowser's proposed response that has generated so much attention?**

There's the city's overall plan, Homeward DC, which touches on every aspect of homelessness. Then there's the shelter piece, which the mayor unveiled overnight to the entire city and got a lot of pushback on. However, that's just one aspect of a much larger plan.

In response to concerns over the cost of leasing land for building new shelters, City Council Chairman Phil Mendelson has adjusted the plan and moved many of the sites that were getting pushback to city owned land. And the City Council just passed this revised plan.

Most of the folks I work with are saying if they can stay on the timeline to have this done by the start of hypothermia season in 2018, then we are okay with it. And if you can bring down the costs that's great. I was never under the impression that making an impact would be cheap in a city with 7,000 homeless individuals. If we want to do something significant it will cost us money.

If they can find a way to do this smartly and safely and on time it doesn't matter to me if it's privately leased land or city owned land. It just needs to get done.

**And what are the key priorities within the advocacy community around this issue?**

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We need to get out of the homeless shelter at D.C. General. It's not an adequate space for what our needs are right now. Having over 200 families in an unacceptable living condition, and then trying to provide effective case management in that type of environment... It just doesn't work.

Getting folks into smaller communities with wraparound services will help us to get people out of the shelter system faster and into a safe space. Some of the biggest complaints I've heard from homeless individuals about D.C. General is the environment of the building. They say it's a heavy feeling there. It just kind of sucks everything out of you. To be in such a dire situation and also in such a bad physical space.

**Can you talk about faith community's work around homelessness in the city? I know it's been a priority issue.**

For different issues we are involved with multiple groups. The Washington Interfaith Network (WIN) has been one major group working on the shelter issue, particularly the closing of D.C. General and getting people into safer communities. WIN is comprised of faith groups and even some non-faith groups across the city from every ward, and it has been advocating for a solution to D.C. General for over four years.

We have been engaged on this issue long-term. Fixing a systematic problem will take time and engagement from people who care about it, and that's what the faith community has going for them. When people run for office they know they have to answer to us because we will show up every time and say this is a concern for us.

**Foundry has been focused on ending chronic homelessness within the city. How optimistic are you about that goal right now?**

As you said, Foundry has been focused specifically on chronic homelessness. So people who have been homeless four times within a year or for a year or longer and have some sort of debilitating condition. These are the folks who are most likely to die.

There are about 1,800 of these chronically homeless individuals in the city right now. Last year, because of investment from the city and the federal government, we saw a large decrease in our homeless veteran population. It went from around 700 individuals to around 200 in one calendar year. It shows what it takes to get folks off the streets and what is possible.

If we can similarly reduce the chronic homeless population by 500 individuals a year, then we are only three or four years out provided the city makes the necessary investments. We need to continue to show that this is the smart investment. Leaving an individual on the street costs around \$40,000 a year because of the use of things like emergency services, ambulance trips, and time in jail. If we move a chronically homeless individual into permanently supportive housing, it slices the cost in half to about \$22,000. Those are D.C.-specific numbers.

**Do you have any general advice for advocates and policymakers looking to address homelessness in other cities?**

The standard for a longtime, especially in faith communities, is we've said get yourself sober and then we'll give you housing. And stay sober and we'll let you stay. That works about 50 percent of the time.

If you look at things like permanent supportive housing, a year later about 95 percent of those people are still in housing. Once you take care of that baseline food, shelter and water situation, you can then

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address those higher level needs in terms of addiction, alcoholism, and behavioral issues. That's much easier to do once people are in housing.

And I'd also emphasize the importance of an approach to homelessness called coordinated entry. This approach focuses on assessing the needs and vulnerability of individuals then matching people to the type of housing that best fits their need. D.C. implemented it beginning last year and it helps us put people into the types of housing that really fits their need and addresses their issues. It keeps us from offering short term help to those who need long-term assistance, and prioritizes the most vulnerable part of the population.

*Ben Roberts is Associate Pastor and Director of Social Justice Ministries at the Foundry United Methodist Church.*

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