

I have been invited to address you all today to give you an overview of homelessness in our community and the history of the growing problem of homelessness over the past 24 years that I have been involved helping people who are homeless

Someone is homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and  
If they have a primary nighttime residence that is -

A supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);

An institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or

A public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

I began working at Urban Ministries of Wake County, working with the poor and homeless in our community when my youngest son was five years old, in kindergarten, and very cute. Today, he's 29, has a master's degree and teaches—and he's still very cute. Back in 1980, when the religious congregations in the downtown Raleigh area founded Urban Ministries, homelessness looked very different than it does today.

Back then, the face of homelessness was that of a hard drinking or crazy-acting man or the occasional woman, who could be found sleeping in church doorways, under porches of homes near downtown, under railway bridges, or anywhere they could get in out of the weather. They frequently hopped freight trains headed North or South depending on the season, and many of us in town knew most of them, at least by sight.

In those days, we still had affordable housing for most people, and the few homeless souls we saw daily on our streets had severe mental, physical, and addiction

problems. Many of them, or many more like them, are still on the streets in Raleigh and across America today. The difference is, while once they were “The Homeless,” today those same people make up only about 20% of all people who are homeless in our community and in most communities across America. Today we call them the “chronically homeless”—those who have been homeless for more than a year or who have experienced multiple instances of homelessness over a period of years--those who often have severe or debilitating mental illness, severe substance addiction and other physical or emotional conditions.

What has changed so dramatically over the past 25 years is the enormous growth in the population of what I call the INVISIBLE HOMELESS in every community across our nation. Invisible because while they are part of our everyday lives, we don't recognize them as being homeless. The face of homelessness today looks so different as to have been unimaginable 25 years ago.

Right now I am going to ask you to put away the image of the homeless street person of a quarter of a century ago, the drunk on the corner, the bag lady. Forget the picture you may have in your mind of the man on the off ramp of the beltline holding a sign that says: “Homeless, will work for food.” Wipe these images clean, and I am going to ask you instead to picture the people who are more commonly homeless among us today.

Picture the infant in the crib next to your baby at your day care center. Picture the young boy getting on the school bus with his backpack and lunch in his hand. Picture the 19-year-old girl serving you at the McDonald's drive thru. Picture the woman checking you out at Wal-Mart or the man in front of you at the Post Office. Picture someone who

pays taxes, pays child support, has a bank account and is saving money, gets gas on her way to work in the morning, cleans your office after you leave in the evening, makes your bed in the hotel on your next business trip. Picture a grandmother with a six-year-old grandson, a woman in a wheelchair, a teenager leaving the library. Picture all of these people and you are looking at the face of homelessness today--in Raleigh, in North Carolina, and all across America.

The numbers of men, women, and children who are homeless have grown all across our country. In 2002, the NC Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs counted 46,000 homeless persons being served in shelters and transitional housing programs across North Carolina. Forty-three percent were single men, 20% single women, and most alarming, 37% families with children.

The Wake County Continuum of Care counted 1,235 homeless persons in Raleigh in shelters, transitional housing programs, and on the streets on December 15, 2003—the annual Point in Time count. The breakdown among population groups was similar to that of the North Carolina statistics. Beyond that we know that in Wake County, fully 38% of homeless persons were discharged from the criminal justice system, from treatment programs and from hospitals and rehabilitation programs.

In 1986, in a study entitled, “The Street People...Who Are They?” done by United Health Services for Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Durham, between 200-400 people in Raleigh were identified as homeless. To my knowledge this was the first definitive count of homeless persons in our area performed by any group. At the time we were appalled at the high numbers.

In the span of 25 years, one generation, we have seen homelessness grow from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands—840,000 nationally I recently heard. This is a very conservative estimate; some would say the number is more like 3,000,000 people nationally. Another alarming statistic is that an estimated 14% of all Americans have experienced an episode of homeless some time in their lives. This country has spawned an epidemic, an epidemic of homelessness.

Contributing factors to this growth are many and complex. This single biggest factor has been the loss of affordable housing stock. According to a study published in 1998 by the National Low Income Housing Coalition,<sup>1</sup> in the ten years between 1976 and 1986, the Federal government spent a total of \$400.7 billion dollars on affordable housing which produced 1,892,000 units of housing. Over the next ten years, between 1986 and 1995, the amount of federal dollars for affordable housing dropped to a total of \$133.1 billion dollars, producing a total of 744,000 units. That was a loss of \$267.6 billion dollars and 1,148,000 units of housing over ten years.

In 1995, there were 23.7 million households in America with incomes below 50% of the national median. Of these households, 60% lived in housing they could not afford, that is they paid more than 30% of their income for housing costs. Thirty-three percent paid more than 50% of their income for housing costs and were considered severely burdened by housing costs. It is not a coincidence that as affordable housing was drying up across this country, homelessness grew.

The next biggest factor is income. In North Carolina, from the late 70's to the late 90's the average annual income of a family in the bottom 20% of the population only rose

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrews, Nancy O. "Meeting America's Housing Needs: Trends in the Supply of Affordable Housing," April 1998

\$730 from \$12,380 to \$13,110. And the situation has only gotten worse since the recent recession. Families earning the bottom 60% of income appear to have lost all income gains they made during the late 1990's<sup>2</sup>. Couple the ever-shrinking pot of affordable housing with stagnant low wages and you have a recipe for increasing homelessness.

In Raleigh, in order for a family of two to be able to afford to pay fair market rent at no more than 30% of their income and meet their other necessary expenses, it takes an average hourly wage of \$13.14. On average, men and women who are homeless have hourly incomes of no more than \$6 or \$7. And if they depend on SSI disability income, their monthly check is, on average, less than \$500. On average 60% of North Carolina families are not earning enough to meet their basic needs. Ever increasing housing costs put more and more of these families at risk of homelessness every day.<sup>3</sup>

Factor into this equation the trauma of domestic violence, mental illness, physical disability, developmental disability and substance addiction and you begin to get a sense of the complexity of homelessness. While not everyone who is homeless is faced with one or more of these conditions, many are. Helping them transition from homelessness to housing presents unique challenges for the service community. Despite these challenges and those created by the lack of affordable housing and low income, service providers in Wake County, in North Carolina and across the country have helped many thousands of families and individuals over the years move from homelessness to housing.

So we know it is possible to reduce homelessness—to help families and individuals improve their lives and move back into permanent housing. We know what works and doesn't work when it comes to helping people move on. Improving their

---

<sup>2</sup>North Carolina Justice and Community Center, "Working Hard is Still Not Enough,": May 2003

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

ability to earn more money, through education and job skills training, providing mental health and substance abuse services, making transportation more accessible, and offering support networks to homeless families and individuals are all part of the mix of the support services that are critical to success. We have become very skillful at managing homelessness. We now have to be bold enough to say we can end homelessness.

What else do we know? We know that since 38% of homeless persons in North Carolina come directly out of the criminal justice system, from institutions, and medical facilities, this door must be closed. Institutions must create alternative release plans that don't put people out on the streets and in shelters. And since we have seen a corresponding rise in homelessness with the loss of hundreds of billions of dollars in federal affordable housing dollars, we know that we need more affordable housing that people can live in and not spend more than 30% of their income for it.

We must join with other communities across America who have committed to ending homelessness and be bold enough to say that right here in Raleigh, NC, we are going to make a plan to end homelessness in ten years. We must say that since we have seen homelessness escalate from a few street people in the early 80's to the epidemic that we have today, we are going to do something different from this point on. The time has come to move from managing homelessness to ending homelessness. Homelessness as we know it today is a relatively new phenomenon. If our society created it, then our society can end it. We know what must be done; we need only the public and political will to do it.

We welcome all of you here today to join us in developing our Plan to End Homelessness in Wake County.

Ending Homelessness: The 10-Year Action Plan  
First Public Forum: An Education of Diversity  
Meredith College Cate Student Center  
Raleigh, North Carolina  
February 19, 2004

Presented by:

Anne M. Burke, Executive Director  
Urban Ministries of Wake County  
P.O. Box 26476  
Raleigh, NC 27611  
919-836-1642 x 11  
aburke@urbanmin.org