PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY AMONG HOMELESS PEOPLE: A CONTINUUM OF CARE AND SOCIAL POLICY ALTERNATIVES REFRAMING THE PROBLEM OF HOMELESSNESS PROJECT H.O.M.E

> "Homelessness is the problem, not homeless people."
> Sister Mary Scullion, Executive Director, Project H.O.M.E

A Cause that is Worth the Risk

Late in 1997 the city of Philadelphia decided to crack down on homeless people who were sleeping or aggressively panhandling on sidewalks. The form of that crackdown was a controversial "sidewalk behavior ordinance" proposed for the Center City section of Philadelphia, and sponsored by former City Council President and then Democratic Mayoral nominee, John F. Street. The bill, which would slap fines and even criminal penalties on offenders, was part of a comprehensive effort to clean up an upscale and economically important part of town.

In battling the proposal, homeless advocates knew that they risked more than just losing the fight over the proposed law. By standing up to the power structure in Philadelphia, they also risked losing vital political and financial support for their cause. But the stakes around the sidewalk ordinance were just too high, says Sister Mary Scullion, Executive Director of Project H.O.M.E. (Housing, Opportunities for employment, Medical care, Education), the leading advocacy organization for the city's homeless and a leader in the struggle against the sidewalk bill. "With the sidewalk bill, our society was saying that, in some way, homeless people were the problem. And what we were trying to say is *homelessness* is the problem, not homeless *people*."

After a long and tough fight, a modified version of the ordinance passed in January 1998. Through continued pressure on the part of the homeless advocacy community, activists were able to temper the bill's most onerous provisions and, eventually, to secure a number of beneficial provisions for the homeless community. Those provisions included a commitment from the city to allocate $5 million for new treatment facilities, and a promise of enhanced coordination between police and homeless outreach workers. The city also agreed to establish a task force that would monitor police-homeless relations on the streets. Perhaps most important, advocates prevailed in getting lawmakers to tone down the penalties proposed in the bill's original version. While homeless individuals would still be fined anywhere from $20 to $300 for violating the ordinance, there wouldn't be a criminal penalty as a consequence of their arrest, as initially proposed.

But despite the homeless advocacy community's successful efforts to modify the bill's most onerous sections, and to win concessions from the city around funding and police policies related to the homeless, advocates claimed only a partial victory. Most continued to see even the modified bill as misguided, since by its very nature it blamed homeless people for their plight. Even more troubling, the bill framed the problem as one that could be remedied by getting homeless people out of sight, rather than by getting rid of the conditions that cause homelessness in the first place. "We at Project H.O.M.E. are witness to the fact that people that are homeless are valuable people in our society, and that we care about one another," says Sister Mary. "So the goal should be, how do we work with people so we create a hospitable society, not, how do we clean up Center City so that the idol of wealth or the economy prevails?"

Project H.O.M.E.'s re-framing of the perceived problem – from *homeless people* to *homelessness* – is more than a linguistic turn. It reflects the organization's commitment to human dignity that underlies every aspect of its day-to-day practice. This commitment was the reason why H.O.M.E. fought the sidewalk behavior ordinance even as they were able to win an increase in funding for homeless services. Even though H.O.M.E. risked losing high-level political support for its tough stance on the sidewalk ordinance, it decided the cause was worth the risk. "You've got to walk the road possibly at the sacrifice of losing, because the truth really does have to come out," says H.O.M.E. Associate Executive Director Joan Dawson McConnon. "You have to stand for that even at the risk of losing." Put simply by Sister Mary, "People are more important than sidewalks."

Born of the Streets; Building Communities

Co-founded in 1989 by Sister Mary Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon, Project H.O.M.E. has been working on issues of homelessness and poverty in Philadelphia for nearly 20 years. The organization began modestly – running a single emergency winter shelter for men and conducting street outreach in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Since then, it has grown to include an extraordinary array of housing programs, shelters, and direct services, providing a continuum of care through which individuals move as they acquire greater degrees of self-sufficiency.

The organization's record speaks for itself. H.O.M.E. has, in one way or another, helped some 6,800 homeless children and adults move through a "continuum of care" over the past two decades. A partial account of H.O.M.E.'s efforts includes: coordinating all street outreach for the city of Philadelphia; operating 273 units of supportive housing for single adults in 11 different sites in various neighborhoods city-wide; providing on-site health services, after school programs, GED, computer, and literacy classes; leading a multi-partner effort to revitalize "at risk" communities in North Philadelphia; engaging more than 70% of H.O.M.E. residents in voting during the 1999 mayoral elections and setting a federal precedent by using Federal Fair Housing legislation to secure the right for a permanent housing facility for the homeless and mentally ill.

Underpinning H.O.M.E's success is a passion and commitment to community building that has helped the organization gain the respect of Philadelphia residents, business people, and policy makers - opponents as well as supporters - alike.

H.O.M.E.'s varied services and advocacy reflect its commitment to working on both the personal and the systemic level, embracing a mission to "empower persons to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, address structural causes of poverty, and enable all of us to attain our fullest potential as individuals and as members of the broader society."

Believing that "the ultimate answer to the degradation of homelessness and poverty is in the building of community," H.O.M.E. dedicates itself to "nurturing a spirit of community among persons from all walks of life, all of whom have a role to play in making this a more just and compassionate society." In upholding these values, H.O.M.E. is, according to Sister Mary, "a bit of an antithesis to the larger society. We don't totally buy into the values that some of our society and culture puts on in terms of materialism, prestige. We're all working together to create a hospitable society where everybody is welcomed and valued."

Turning Values into Action

Popular wisdom generally holds that ethical or spiritual commitments often get in the way of strategic, practical success in the real world; H.O.M.E.'s experience proves otherwise. Two of H.O.M.E.'s many organizing struggles serve to illustrate this point: the campaign to modify the sidewalk bill and the fight to secure a residence at 1515 Fairmount Avenue in downtown Philadelphia.

As is the case in cities nationwide, Philadelphia has in recent years been wrestling with conflicting values and priorities. On the one hand, officials were intent on shoring up the appearance of a thriving economic center that could attract much-needed business to the city; on the other hand, officials had to consider the right of the city's most vulnerable population to exist in public spaces. In fighting against the sidewalk ordinance—even at the risk of losing promised funds for more shelters--H.O.M.E. refused to condone legislation that would implicitly cast the homeless as less worthy than others.

Choosing instead to "stand with the people we knew," as H.O.M.E. advocates state, they proposed an alternative set of recommendations for how to handle the homelessness conundrum faced by city officials. The result of that effort was the "Blueprint to End Homelessness," a 45-page document crafted in collaboration with other service and advocacy groups throughout the city. The Blueprint is informed by years of experience and collaboration with homeless people throughout the city. Drawing on the stories of real men and women to demonstrate what works, the Blueprint argued that shelters alone are an insufficient answer to the problem, serving as mere holding tanks where the city could essentially tuck the problem away, out of sight and out of mind.

The Power of Real People

What H.O.M.E. argued in the document was that the keys to solving the homeless problem are services, programs, and policies aimed at building ever-increasing degrees of self-sufficiency among homeless people. The Blueprint became an organizing tool, offering "clear, specific examples of what solutions the city could support that we were advocating, where the gaps were, and the history of how we got here. It helped fuel the debate because we could articulate what works," says Peter Gonzalez, Community Economic Developer for HO.M.E. Using real people, the Blueprint illustrated what really worked when it came to improving the lives of the homeless and that what really hurt them "was constantly being pushed aside and pushed out of the way."

Armed with the city's proposed legislation, and the Blueprint as an alternative, H.O.M. E. staff talked to people on the streets, in shelters, in business settings and community forums, helping drive a fresh and productive dialogue about what was needed and what would really help. "Once people's stories come out," says Gonzalez, "they become the framework for larger public actions and for getting people to realize that what the city was proposing wasn't a solution," but instead "was serving some very specific interests in Center City."

Slowly and step-by-step, a cross-section of citizens mobilized against the proposed bill: homeless on the street, homeless in shelters, homeless advocates, and also residents of Center City, even key business people. People camped out on the street in solidarity with the homeless. They slept in front of Center City's fanciest restaurants, and they packed city council chambers the day the bill was presented. The media began to take notice of the sustained citizen action, and eventually police and politicians alike began to realize that fighting such activism was simply a "waste of resources," says Gonzalez.

It was in the face of such unified opposition to the sidewalk ordinance that the city backed down on some of the worst parts of the bill. Criminalizing language was dropped altogether, the police agreed to work more closely with homeless outreach workers, and the city committed to concrete increases in funding to the homeless community. The result, says Gonzalez, was "what we've been talking about all along. We need more people building relationships and talking to folks on the street, finding out what they need, instead of calling the police to solve the problem."

These successes were won by the strategic savvy and organizing power of H.O.M.E. and its allies, note advocates. But the strategy and organizing theme was driven by a simple and powerful principle: The fact of each individual's worth and capacity to "be their best selves," whether that individual is homeless, or whether that person is an opponent of the homeless cause and who might, through understanding a homeless person's story, be moved to "do the right thing."

"An Admirable Stubbornness"

The struggle against the sidewalk bill is just one high-visibility and important example of how H.O.M.E. turned its commitment into action, note H.O.M.E. staff and allies. An equally important fight was the organization's five-year struggle to secure "1515," a permanent residential facility for the homeless and mentally ill.

Just a few short blocks away from a gentrified part of town, the 1515 Fairmount project met virulent neighborhood opposition, as well as opposition from the Chair of the City Council, the mayor of Philadelphia, and even the governor. In McConnon's view, it was a classic struggle between the perceived powerless and the clearly powerful. Neighborhood residents and city and state officials used an array of strategies to block H.O.M.E.'s right to secure 1515, including legal action in state courts and delaying tactics aimed at denying H.O.M.E. the necessary funding from the state housing finance agency for the project.

But as intimidating as the power arrayed against the project might have been, H.O.M.E. remained persistent. As one H.O.M.E. board member commented, H.O.M.E. displayed an "admirable stubbornness" in holding its position. Using its own legal advisors, who served pro bono, H.O.M.E. compelled the U.S. Department of Justice to actually file a case in the Federal Court of Appeals on H.O.M.E.'s behalf. This case took advantage of the Federal Fair Housing Act to argue that a neighborhood could not discriminate against the homeless and mentally ill. In winning the case, H.O.M.E. and the Justice Department established a legal precedent with huge national implications.

As with the sidewalk bill, H.O.M.E. used facts to battle stigma. "The people who began to vocally and legally oppose us were saying bad things about the people that were going to be moving here," says Sister Mary, "that these people would be abusing their kids or setting fire to their neighborhood. And if you knew the men and women that were going to be moving there, it was really hurtful to hear that. You understand what discrimination is – at least I thought I did intellectually – but when it becomes personal you think, 'Why would anyone want to deny [someone] a room here?' That motivated everybody to really try to provide a home. At the heart of the struggle, it was really about the men and women that we knew, the people that had really done all the right things, and they deserved a little place to live."

And again, it was the powerful grassroots support that H.O.M.E. was able to mobilize in what it considered to be such a clear and simple just cause that won the day. Citizens across Philadelphia dogged the mayor throughout the debate "Anywhere the mayor

went," one board member says, "people were showing up, wearing the T-shirts saying 'Free 1515.'" Adds another board member, "If you live in Philadelphia, all you need to say is '1515,' and you don't have to say anything else. It's like saying in baseball, 'Lefty,' meaning Steve Carlton, or in basketball, 'Michael,' meaning Michael Jordan. It just evokes something. You don't have to say anymore than '1515' and there's a real sense among people who have been in this city that justice prevailed."

In 1994-95, at the end of a four-year legal battle, work began on 1515 Fairmount Avenue, which opened for residents in 1996. It is now home to 48 formerly homeless individuals with a primary diagnosis of chronic mental illness, as well as a Café and Catering business and Thrift Store, which provide employment experience for residents and community members.

Upholding Dignity

Holding fast to principle and using that principle to guide strategy and sustain commitment has made H.O.M.E. a power to be reckoned with in Philadelphia, say those who have followed the organization's action and progress. But it would be dishonest to say that holding on to principle is always easy, say H.O.M.E. activists. In the case of the sidewalk ordinance and 1515, H.O.M.E. was painfully aware that in taking the stances it took, it risked alienating critical political allies and losing much needed funding for the homeless community. The key, says Sister Mary, was to "continue our relationships with people on the street and uphold that dignity and never give in. And to be honest, that wasn't always an easy decision."

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