

THE  PARTNERSHIP FOR THE HOMELESS

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# Promises Broken

*Mayor Michael Bloomberg's  
Failed Legacy on Homelessness*

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*How Mayor Bill de Blasio  
Can Begin to Chart a New Course*

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by

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“Promises Broken” is a sequel to an earlier opinion piece entitled, “Promises to Keep,” written at a time when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg was set to begin his third term. While his first eight years were marked by dramatic increases in homelessness, some of us still held out hope that, given the skyrocketing numbers, perhaps the mayor would take a step back to reassess his priorities and work with various stakeholders outside of government to begin to craft effective solutions to solve homelessness. Surely, when he took office, the mayor was unaware of the challenges ahead, especially since prior administrations had failed to invest in the infrastructure to solve the problem, instead relying almost exclusively on expanding our city’s shelter system.

Unfortunately, hope for a change in course by Mayor Bloomberg went unrealized. Instead, the mayor became more ensconced and insular, even at one point claiming that the reason for the increase in homeless-

ness is a result of his administration making shelters more comfortable.<sup>i</sup>

Now, four years later, with the city's shelter population at record levels, it's time to review how (a) Mayor Bloomberg failed to address homelessness here in our city, and (b) Mayor Bill de Blasio can begin to chart a new course.

(a)

The startling fact that we now have more than 52,000 families and single adults languishing in shelters each night is perhaps a good moment in time to reflect on Mayor Bloomberg's legacy - and earlier promises made. One that looms quite large is his pledge, made at the start of his administration, to reduce the city's shelter population by, at the very least, two-thirds.<sup>ii</sup>

At the time, New Yorkers gave the proverbial thumbs up to the mayor for what we all believed was a thoughtful and far-reaching plan to reform the city's approach to homelessness. His stated focus on prevention certainly signaled a welcome sea change in policy - a paradigm shift that was in sync with current national thinking and trends.

Indeed, no one could quarrel with the mayor's position that it was more judicious to allocate dollars to help

stabilize a family already in housing than to spend \$36,000 a year to warehouse an evicted family in a city shelter. And proven prevention strategies - especially the creation of community-based support systems - are critical to keeping people in their homes. For every family that isn't uprooted, every child who remains in his own school, every senior citizen who keeps her home of 40 years, that's an enormous victory.

But the mayor's immense promise has been broken. There is now a deep chasm between the mayor's rhetoric and the reality of his administration's efforts.

The reality is that today the family shelter population is at an all-time high. Over 22,000 children and some 10,500 families call a shelter home, comprising almost 75% of our city's entire shelter population. Significantly, just in his last term alone, the number of children in city shelters increased by more than 50%.<sup>iii</sup>

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These troubling statistics obviously do not include the countless thousands sleeping on the living room couch in an overcrowded apartment of a family member or friend, or those who

are about to lose their homes as they struggle to pay more than 50% of their income toward rent.

And, most notably, despite the facile response by the mayor and his spokespeople, these dramatic increases are not simply the result of the economic crisis. Rather, New Yorkers desperately seeking shelter are from communities that have been suffering under a “great recession” for decades, routinely making unthinkable choices between paying for rent or food or medical care.

So what went wrong?

As a start, the mayor simply did not address our city’s dire affordable housing shortage. While the mayor touted his “New Marketplace” housing plan for its production and preservation of affordable housing, that initiative reserved only a fraction of the units for households that are either homeless or most at risk.<sup>iv</sup> Significantly, the Independent Budget Office reported more than four years ago that the mayor had already met his low-income housing targets, which were largely fueled by the preservation of thousands of Mitchell-Lama housing units.<sup>v</sup> This is certainly an important citywide effort, but it does nothing to increase the number of affordable units available and thus stem the tide of poor families in need of housing.<sup>vi</sup>

Moreover, and contrary to his promises, the mayor never charted a new course on homelessness or broadened the frame in which his administration viewed the problem. Instead of understanding it in the

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context of the larger struggle against poverty, his early promises drove his lieutenants to create a patchwork plan that just tinkered with a fundamentally flawed system.

A prime example is the mayor's prevention programs, which were not designed to create robust community support systems

of care or build neighborhood-based structures that could address the systemic causes of homelessness. Rather these programs simply diverted families from shelter, mainly providing the quick-fix of a short-term rent subsidy, keeping families out of the shelter system and the shelter numbers from growing even larger.

But for how long? Especially when the rent subsidy wasn't coupled with efforts that could help families become economically stable after the subsidy ended. Without a more integrated plan we were simply putting off the inevitable – soon to be confronting

the same fundamental issues that brought families to shelter in the first place. Indeed, how does a rent subsidy alone help a young mother, emblematic of so many in shelters, find

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meaningful work when she cannot read above the 8th grade level and has few or no marketable skills?

For better or worse, this proposition was never tested because the mayor withdrew the rent subsidy program, leaving so many trapped in city shelters and the numbers skyrocketing.<sup>vii</sup>

Unfortunately, without that subsidy and without families steadily moving out of shelter, the Department of Homeless Services, always cognizant of the mayor's promise, desperately tried to shrink those numbers by any means possible, creating stricter eligibility requirements for entering shelters, charging rent to stay in a shelter, threatening to evict families for failing to comply with so-called shelter rules, or offering a one-way ticket out of the city.<sup>viii</sup>

Perhaps most disheartening, many of these initiatives were calculated to divert the public attention from the depth of

the problem we were actually confronting and to shift the blame to those who have been victimized by homelessness. The underlying message was that many families seeking shelter were really not in need, or they were rule breakers and not deserving of help, or they were non-New Yorkers taking advantage of the wealth of city services.

And this message - in essence, blaming poor people for their poverty - also undergirded initiatives developed by his Commission on Economic Opportunity, which was supposedly formed to offer the mayor concrete proposals for “reducing” poverty here in our city. In fact, the one notable effort by the Commission was built on a rather tepid approach, concentrating its attention primarily on a scheme that rested on the principal idea that we just need to motivate poor people to change their behavior; that we can break cycles of poverty if we simply provide poor people with cash incentives to “do the right thing.”<sup>ix</sup> This “lift yourself up by your bootstraps” approach, while appealing to those who believe it’s only about taking personal responsibility, missed a more widespread reality: the necessity to address the pernicious effects of living in need as a first step to creating (or rediscovering) the personal “wherewithal” to succeed and thrive.

In reality, the mayor’s so-called incentive program

could never assist a poor family find decent, affordable housing. Or help the head of a household find a living wage job with health benefits. And what incentives can lure a young person to a failing school?

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Not surprisingly, the Commission's program of incentives failed, largely because no corresponding effort was made to deal with the structural challenges that people face when confronting poverty, and it was soon withdrawn by the mayor.<sup>x</sup>

In looking back over the past 12 years then, the mayor's major efforts on homelessness focused predominantly on shelter at the expense of real solutions. And as a result, in 2013, the city spent a staggering \$500.1 million to shelter thousands upon thousands of families and their children.<sup>xi</sup> Factor in the cost of sheltering single adults as well, and that figure doubles to nearly \$1 billion.<sup>xii</sup> For that staggering sum, we're left with little or no investment in the future of these families and individuals beyond the act of warehousing them and keeping them out of our

sight.

Sadly, in the end, Mayor Bloomberg went from the soaring rhetoric of how we can dramatically reduce homelessness during his administration to simply accepting it as an inevitable part of our urban landscape.

(b)

As Mayor de Blasio and his administration takes office, there is indeed some heavy lifting that needs to be done. Genuine change is achievable, though, if that effort starts with a commitment to fundamentally shift course – to move away from the quick-fix and crisis management to one that invests in the long term.

In changing course, the mayor can be guided, in some ways, by the Bloomberg administration's failures. Two glaring areas that were clearly neglected and require immediate attention are (1) the creation of affordable housing opportunities for families and individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and, concurrently, (2) the development of robust, community-based services that are truly designed to provide targeted support needed to prevent homelessness.

There is certainly much to be done to implement changes in these two areas of need, but they should

provide Mayor de Blasio with, at least, a broad blueprint for building the foundation for sustainable solutions.

Below then is a brief discussion to help move that process forward. It should be read, though, with an understanding that homelessness provides us with a complex array of issues – from the personal to the structural – and that we can't expect to create equilibrium by addressing any one issue in isolation.

Moreover, to ensure success of these efforts, Mayor de Blasio must change the current relationship with community leadership and other stakeholders, outside of government, bringing them into the process, as well.

This shift is crucial because, over the years, the Bloomberg administration largely relied on a top-down approach; decision-making rested almost exclusively on the edicts of government.

A more open administration can begin to develop the important public-private relationships needed so that there is, indeed, shared responsibility with city agencies

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to tackle the structural issues that are often the drivers of homelessness. Certainly, no one is happy with the current approach, which so often pits homeless families and individuals against communities, advocates against administrators, and neighborhood groups ignored by or, at best, working at cross-purposes with the city.

Perhaps Mayor de Blasio has made a good start to manage this effort by appointing Lilliam Barrios-Paoli as Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. Hopefully, the new deputy mayor can use the position as a platform to reframe the discussion and form working groups from the public and private sectors to implement the necessary change in how we've historically dealt with homelessness.

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### **Housing, not Shelter**

In adopting a change in strategy on homelessness, Mayor de Blasio must start by eschewing our long-standing reliance on emergency shelter as our primary approach to confronting homelessness. Instead, as a city, we must invest in housing, understanding it as the locus from which all other positive outcomes can flow.

Our chief disagreement isn't that shelter is not necessary to provide immediate, short-term, emergency relief. Far from it. But it can't predominate virtually all of our efforts – especially with no long-term investment strategy in housing. Otherwise, we'll continue to find individuals and families trapped in shelters with virtually no way out, as we do now.

Thus we need to dramatically shift our 30-year old homeless paradigm, so that housing, and not shelter, is understood as a fundamental right.<sup>xiii</sup>

With that perspective as the driving force of our homeless policy, we can move beyond shelter to housing or, more to the point, a home whether we're working with that fellow on our street corner struggling with mental health issues, or with that young mother and her child languishing in a shelter.<sup>xiv</sup>

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Mayor de Blasio surely has recognized this as an essential change in approach with his endorsement of

a broad-based policy of inclusionary zoning (e.g., setting aside 20% of new construction for affordable units). And while the mayor's proposal is an important change in policy from the Bloomberg administration, much more needs to be done with respect to both affordability and housing preservation. Indeed, inclusionary zoning has met with only moderate success in other jurisdictions, and cannot be the sole initiative to underpin the mayor's housing plan.<sup>xv</sup> Nor can that plan meet the needs of the countless thousands who are homeless or near-homeless.

To expand on his proposed initiative then, there are quite a few affordable housing proposals and platforms, endorsed by groups here in the city and in other jurisdictions, which can provide Mayor de Blasio with concrete ideas and a feasible framework in which to begin to expand on and fund his housing plan during his first term and beyond.<sup>xvi</sup>

Perhaps to jump start this process and to offer real thought leadership on the best options available to target housing resources to those who are homeless or at-risk, Deputy Mayor Barrios-Paoli should create a housing advisory council drawn from diverse segments of our city, including housing developers, businesses, local public officials and civic leadership, and service and housing providers.

This advisory council can play a critical role in advising the deputy mayor on such things as (1) how best to allocate public resources, in the form of incentives and subsidies, for the construction of affordable housing; (2) best practices for preserving our city's aging housing stock, especially targeting the rent-regulated apartments that provide low-cost housing to millions of New Yorkers; (3) ways to expand and improve upon our city's supportive housing network; and (4) mechanisms to coordinate the work of the city's four housing agencies, so that neighborhood specific housing plans can be collaboratively created.

### **Immediate Relief**

While a solid affordable housing plan will provide the city with a long-term investment strategy in solving homelessness, there still needs to be some immediate relief to our exploding shelter population. Thus, in the midst of implementing a more expansive plan, Mayor de Blasio should put in place a robust mix of rent subsidies that ease the pathway out of shelter, especially creating greater access to Section 8 certificates (e.g., expanding the available pool of certificates, better targeting their use, and streamlining application processes).

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Moreover, any rent subsidy plan - especially one that doesn't mirror the permanency of Section 8 and is time-limited - needs to be tied to a larger and bolder set of initiatives that begins to support economic stability and independence. Otherwise, we'll find ourselves, once again, in the same predicament as the Bloomberg administration did, asking, "what happens after the subsidy ends?"

Thus, as a city we need to put in place a broad, integrated neighborhood-based homelessness prevention strategy that, coupled with a rent subsidy, invests in a multi-generational approach - one that works with young children and families to older adults.

So, for example, a great early development program

for a toddler (as Mayor de Blasio promotes) must be matched with programs that help older siblings thrive in high quality schools, that assist mom and dad complete their own schooling and aspire to well-paying career paths, and that ensure grandparents healthfully age-in-place in their own homes. (And of course, for those who are infirm or struggling with drug use or mental health issues, a strong safety net of support.)

### **Creating a Seamless Service System**

In promoting community-based services that are targeted to prevent homelessness it's important to recognize, however, that, all too often, families and individuals, who have fallen into shelter, have slipped through the cracks of our city's broken social service network.

While neighborhoods are often replete with non-profit and government agencies, services are often fragmented with little or no meaningful collaboration.

Currently, the city's Department of Homeless Services – the agency charged with running shelters –

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is quick to point out that its mission is limited to managing the homeless shelter system. But what about addressing the underlying issues that are at the root of homelessness? “Not my job.”

Therein lies the problem.

No fewer than seven city agencies are funded to provide services directly targeted to homeless New Yorkers, with the lion’s share going to the Department of Homeless Services. Perhaps most important, spending emphasizes short-term solutions and promotes fragmented responsibility. The result is predictable: services are not successful and resources are wasted.

Unfortunately, city agencies are like little feudal states, each constrained by its own narrow budget and mission. By their very nature, bureaucracies tend to be insular and protective of their turf. The big picture is easily lost.

And homelessness doesn’t fall easily into a neatly labeled box or a neatly labeled city agency mission statement. Homelessness in our city touches the lives of children, victims of domestic abuse, seniors, people struggling with HIV/AIDS, immigrants, people suffering with mental health or substance use problems, fire victims, teenagers growing too old for foster care, men and women working at minimum-wage jobs, and more. No single city agency is empowered to address the

multiplicity of their needs.

To remedy this, Mayor de Blasio must make accountability one of the linchpins of a new approach – creating a model that erases the arbitrary and artificial boundaries that limit the effectiveness of city agencies.

Once again, Deputy Mayor Barrios-Paoli can be charged with reining in and targeting all of the city's existing services, and designing a seamless model where city agencies and community-based organizations are sharing data and working with common metrics for success. This would be an important step in making sure that, together, these agencies and organizations (1) collaboratively develop a comprehensive plan that is based on the unique needs in each community and then (2) saturate these communities with the targeted resources required to create an effective system to prevent homelessness.

### **Changing Culture**

While coordinating services is crucial, it's also imperative to change the institutional culture in which we provide services to homeless individuals and families.

Current city practice, generally employed by agencies and non-profit providers operating shelters, virtually ignores the trauma homelessness inflicts on individuals

and families – who often feel afraid, disengaged, and powerless.<sup>xvii</sup>

Indeed, the pervasive belief fostered by the city and its many shelter and other service providers is that

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people who experience homelessness lack the personal wherewithal or motivation to better themselves. The truth is, though, that people who are or have been homeless feel demoralized, a feeling that only grows over time and can come to dominate how they think about themselves.

Unfortunately, those working with homeless individuals and families ignore this reality and contribute to those feelings of demoralization. Though perhaps

well-intentioned, staff treats a client as if she or he were identical to the problem, which further dampens self-worth. And too often clients are labeled “service resistant” and threatened with sanctions, believing that these threats will provide them with the necessary motivation to “move on.”

There thus needs to be in place a new model of service - a real culture change - where service providers take a collaborative approach that engages clients in a way that reestablishes their identity apart from

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homelessness, and channels their strengths to break through the trauma. Research in the field demonstrates that the current model of practice, which is punitive in nature, is antithetical to promoting good outcomes. Rather, we need to promote, instead, a model that enhances a person's "self-efficacy" which will, in turn, lead to greater outcomes in areas such as housing and employment.

To that end, there is some promising work by Dr. Peter Fraenkel of CUNY Graduate Center and the Ackerman Institute for Family, especially his "Fresh Start" work that has developed approaches to successfully disentangle from a family's sense of self the external stigma of homelessness. And that work has been supported by research conducted by Dr. Daphne Oyerman of the University of Michigan, who found that poor children

often have internalized an identity that makes them believe they're incapable of academic success.<sup>xviii</sup>

## **A Research Driven Strategy**

In constructing a constellation of essential community-based services, it is also important that we begin to rely on a research-based strategy, evaluating and, where necessary, discarding old approaches and testing new initiatives. This is critical not only to quantify our efforts, but also to determine whether our assumptions are sound. How someone reconnects to community and re-establishes oneself after homelessness is often predicated on why (or the whys) that person (or family) lost his (or their) housing.

And weaving data together enables us to refine and build evidence-based “best practices” so that we can effectively lay the groundwork for helping translate direct services offered clients to scale, allowing others to adopt and adapt working models. It'll also permit us to segment various populations so that these models can address their unique needs (as well as the needs of sub-populations) rather than relying on a traditional “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Unfortunately, few today operate with this paradigm in mind. In truth, our collective understanding of what drives homelessness is still somewhat nascent and always evolving.

Finally, producing evidence-based “best practices” also helps realize an equally important goal of changing the public perception about and support for

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long-term investments that genuinely will lead to preventing and ending homelessness. This approach should allow us to finally wean ourselves away from the “quick-fix” and “putting up the numbers” mentality. Too often, we focus on programs that have the luster of superficial accomplishments. But, the household bottom line is often the same as it was before — marginally above, at or below the poverty level. Nothing happens to break generational patterns of homelessness, little changes for these individuals and families to realize their inherent potential to contribute fully to our community.

## **Conclusion**

With so many huge collective issues at stake, we're hopeful Mayor Bill de Blasio will indeed create new opportunities for change, allowing us to move beyond the status quo. In doing so, he'll certainly be able to inspire all New Yorkers to dedicate their collective energies, creative vision, ambitions, and resources to a fundamentally different approach - one that will focus on ending homelessness.

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Indeed, to be successful, it is imperative that we begin to make real change to the conditions under which poor people live - conditions that are real stressors that put their well-being at risk; that create a sense of powerlessness and despair; and that can entrap them into believing they are unable to create positive change in their lives.<sup>xix</sup>

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Creating opportunities to live in affordable and decent housing is surely an important start. But there are also other congruent issues at stake, such as inadequate access to health care, enervated neighborhood schools, stagnant local

economies, and few economic opportunities that must be incorporated into any citywide response, if we're truly to address the underlying issues that drive so many into homeless.<sup>xx</sup>

These tough economic times demand nothing less. The enormous dollars spent on shelter and other emergency stopgap measures solve nothing and only continue to be a drain on the public fisc. The human cost is incalculable.

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## Endnotes

- i See, *New York Magazine*, August, 24, 2012.
- ii The City of New York, Office of the Mayor, “Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter, The Action Plan for New York City” (2004).
- iii Compare NYC Department of Homeless Services Daily Report for December 6, 2013 with the Daily Report for January 6, 2009.
- iv The New Housing Marketplace, “Creating Housing for the Next Generation, New York,” 2004.
- v The Mayor’s New Housing Marketplace Plan: Progress to Date, New York Independent Budget Office, November 2007.
- vi By 2009, the number of low-income units, either in new or rehabilitated buildings, was drowned out by the number lost to deregulation. In fact, there was an estimated loss of about 128,000 units. See, *NY Times*, “As City Adds Housing for Poor, Market Subtracts,” October 15, 2009. Further, in a survey done that year by Picture the Homeless along with the Manhattan Borough President, they found, in Manhattan alone, there was a total of 1,723 vacant buildings with 11,170 empty units in those buildings, which could be rehabbed and converted into low-income units.
- vii “Clock Ticks for a Key Homeless Program,” *NY Times*, May 21, 2011. While the initial public response to withdraw the subsidy was to point a finger at the state in withdrawing its money, Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs recently stated that the Bloomberg administration withdrew the subsidy because it was an incentive for families to enter shelter. It was astounding that she made these statements in the face of the astronomical increase in the family shelter population after the rent subsidy was eliminated.
- viii See e.g., “Homeless Families Could face Eviction Over Rules,” *NY Times*, July 28, 2009.; “City Aids Homeless With One-Way Ticket,” *NY Times*, July 29, 2009.
- ix See, *Increasing Opportunity and Reducing Poverty in New York City*, Commission for Economic Opportunity, September 2006. See e.g., “Bloomberg Plans New Office to Help New York’s Poor,” *NY Times*, December 19, 2006; “Cash Incentives for Poor Families Renewed,” *NY Times*, September 21, 2009.

- x The program was ended by the Bloomberg Administration in 2010.
- xi New York City By The Numbers, New York Independent Budget Office, March 5, 2013.
- xii Give 'Em Shelter: Various City Agencies Spend Over \$900 Million on Homeless Services, New York Independent Budget Office, March 20, 2002.
- xiii See e.g., United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- xiv By now we should know that it's not shelter that's a lure to help people leave the streets, but rather housing. Study after study have shown that people come off the street when they're given an opportunity to move right into a home. And this is so even for those who are struggling with mental health issues or drug and alcohol use, though surely they'll need services once there. See e.g., Housing First Services for People Who Are Homeless, Padgett, D., Gulcur L., Tsemberis S., *Research on Social Work Practice*, Vol. 16 No. 1, January 2006 74-83.
- xv See e.g., Crain's, December, 11 2013.
- xvi See e.g., Housing First Platform, Affordable Housing for All New Yorkers, May 2013.
- xvii See e.g., Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homeless Services Settings, Hopper, E., Bassuk, E., Olivert, J., *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*, 2009, 131-151.
- xviii Dr. Fraenkel had been working in homeless shelters in Bronx for a number of years, trying to understand people's barriers to employment, and Dr. Oyserman was looking at barriers to educational success among low-income children. They confirm that both adults and children are profoundly impacted by the experience of homelessness, so that all they are able to see of themselves are their problems -and that homelessness has become entangled with their self-identity, which of course impacts self-efficacy. See, Multiple Family Discussion Groups for Families that are Homeless, Fraenkel, P., Multiple Family Discussion Groups for Families that are Homeless, Chptr. 13; The Possible Selves of Diverse Adolescents, Oyserman D., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol91(1), Jul2006, 188-204.

xix See, Saegert, S. & Evans, G. (2003), Poverty, Housing Niches, and Health in the United States. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(3), pp.569-589.

xx Brooks-Gunn, J. & Duncan, G. (1997), The Effects of Poverty on Children. *The Future of Children: Special issue on Children and Poverty*, 7(2), pp.55-71; Ross, C. & Mirowsky, J. (2009), Neighborhood Disorder, Alienation, and Distress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 50(3), pp. 49-64; Ross, C. (2000), Neighborhood Disadvantage and Adult Depression, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41(1), pp.177-187; Ross, C., Mirowsky, J. & Prisbesh, S. (2001), Powerlessness and the Amplification of Threat: Neighborhood Disadvantage, Disorder, and Mistrust, *American Sociological Review*, 66(4), pp.568-591.; Geis, K & Ross, C. (1998), A New Look at Urban Alienation: The Effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Perceived Powerlessness. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(3), pp. 232-246; Wallace, D. & Wallace, R. (2001), A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled.

Of course, we are not suggesting that some do not have built-in reservoirs of resilience that permit them to rise above the structural constraints, and the simple availability of social services and initiatives such as GED programs or child-care tax credits may be all that it takes to propel them to financial prosperity and personal wellness. Our own frontline experience, however, attests to a more widespread reality of the need to address the underlying community-based impacts of poverty as a necessary step to creating the "wherewithal" to succeed and thrive.

## *Our Mission*

The Partnership for the Homeless is committed to building a just and equitable society and creating lasting community change through solution-oriented programs and policy initiatives that will eliminate the root causes of homelessness.

**THE**  **PARTNERSHIP** FOR THE **HOMELESS**



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