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Conversations from Invisible Neighbors: Fighting the Stigma of Homelessness in Chicago

DePaul Panel

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CONVERSATIONS FROM INVISIBLE NEIGHBORS: FIGHTING THE STIGMA OF HOMELESSNESS IN CHICAGO

INTRODUCTION AND OPENING REMARKS

By Shaye Loughlin¹

Thank you so much for joining us. Today, I think is a great example of DePaul at its best. It's a group of people working together who really care about important social justice issues and bringing the community together to learn and to talk about ways that we can respond to these issues. Each year, the Rinn Law Library sets out to take a deeper dive into a social justice issue. The Center for Public Interest Law and the Journal for Social Justice have been partners in that initiative for the past few years. And this year, that topic is homelessness.

We will talk a little bit about the issues and will go on to expose some of the misconceptions about homelessness and the realities. Then, we will take a deeper dive into some of the solutions. Throughout this event consider: What are communities doing? How are they responding specifically? How is Chicago responding? And talk a little bit about ways that we can all get involved.

¹ Executive Director of the Center for Public Interest Law at DePaul University College of Law.

INSTITUTE OF GLOBAL HOMELESSNESS

Hello everyone, my name is Lydia Stazen and I have the privilege of working here at DePaul University as the Executive Director of our Institute for Global Homelessness. I think there are a lot of places our institute could be. For example, we could be a standalone nonprofit, but I am really pleased that we are here at DePaul University because I think it says something about what DePaul University thinks about its mission sort of outside the walls of the classroom.

I find it really interesting that global homelessness is mentioned in DePaul's strategic plan. I do not know how many universities have a social issue in their strategic plan. I think it is an issue that is close to DePaul's heart because it was close to St. Vincent's heart. Thus, I cannot think of a better kind of environment for the Institute of Global Homelessness to exist. I am pleased to be here at DePaul overall and to be part of this conversation today. Thank you to the folks who made this event possible, and just a little bit more about our institute before I go to the presentation part.

The Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) has only been around for about five years. We were founded as a joint initiative in 2014 between DePaul University and an organization called DePaul International. DePaul International does direct service work for people experiencing homelessness in eight different countries. And again, DePaul International was kind of founded on those principles and values of St. Vincent de Paul. Really, the institute was founded to be a sort of marriage between academic best practices, research, thinking, and practitioners who are doing service on the streets to people who are experiencing homelessness. As a result, the Institute of Global Homelessness is really unique in its focus on being sort of applied research focused around global street homelessness. There is no other organization in the world that focuses on global street homelessness, so we are pleased occupy that space. Ultimately, everything that we do is really driven by those kinds of Vincentian values – being person centered, but also being collaborative. We know that no one agency is going to solve this problem alone. We have to be working with people from all different sectors, all different walks of life in order to really address a complicated issue. We need to be brave. We need to try new things. We need to do things that work, and we need to give up things that are not working, which is much harder than it sounds. And just continually learning what is working, what is not working. How are we changing and adapting as the issue changes? How do we go about doing this works?

IGH has a hub that has literally thousands of pieces of research on it, aiming to bridge research to practice. I know busy executive directors do not always have time to read pages of best practice and research, and so we try to sort of stand in that gap to say “this is what the best practice is telling us. This is what the research base is telling us.” Or “here is how you make that change on the ground.” Working with people who are experiencing homelessness to see those better outcomes are sort of like unofficial tagline. It is like we read it, so you do not have to. Also, we advocate for international policy. We just came back from a couple of weeks at the United Nations where we were really focused on getting some particular language around global definitions of homelessness and really advocating for measurement to happen.

LYDIA STAZEN Q&A

Audience Question: What does the poverty situations with other countries look like?

Lydia Stazen: Right now, we are working pretty heavily within the United Nations’ ecosystem because many countries, particularly in the global south, really look to the United Nations and the Sustainable Development Goals as ways to shape their own national strategy. I think in the United States we do not really pay that much attention to what the United Nations says or does but many other countries do. As a result, we are working with them to create policies around what homelessness looks like around the world, why counting people who are homeless is so important, and then its strategies around how then do you serve those people so that we can see the numbers of people who are homeless going down over time. That is kind of the focus of the international policy work that we do. But it is tricky because homelessness looks different in lots of different places.

There are two sides to the coin on what causes homelessness. One side is the system level causes. For example, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, all of those sorts of discriminatory issues which are baked part and parcel into our systems. Those absolutely cause homelessness. Then you think about poverty or you think about diminishing investment in services or in housing options. Mass incarceration is also a huge driver of homelessness. Again, these examples are at the systems level. There are also the big picture, large scale events around war, natural disasters, climate events, all of those types of things can cause people from a systems level to go into homelessness.

Then we have on the other side of that coin, individual level causes. Basically, these are the things happening in a particular person's life that may cause homelessness. Such as, a traumatic personal event like job loss, domestic violence, that sort of thing. And if you have a disability, whether that is a mental disability or a physical health disability, you are more vulnerable to experiencing homelessness and then issues of substance abuse as well do come into come into play.

If we think about think about the systems level and individual level, then we can think about the solutions at that level as well. So, what are the are the systems level solutions? When we think about systems level, we want to think about sort of turning off the taps. What can we do in our systems, in our institutions, in our city, that that mean less people will be vulnerable or at risk to becoming homeless? That turns us to policy. Policies to protect against discrimination and making sure that those policies are enforced. Greater investment in services and in housing are a big piece of the puzzle to solving it. Thinking about criminal justice reform, thinking about climate change action, and those types of things that can really help to prevent homelessness before it happens.

It is also important to make data driven decisions. This involves collecting data at the systems level. One example is knowing exactly how many people in your community are experiencing homelessness, what are the different ways to slice and dice that data so that we can begin to refine the solutions over time. And then another thing that we have seen be successful in communities around the world are community wide approaches. Thus, it is not any particular agency's job alone to end homelessness, but the whole community, the a whole society has to be working together towards this issue. This is much more difficult than it sounds like it is going to be to get everybody on the same page, to say ending homelessness is a shared goal across our city, across our community. As a result, we have got academia at the table. We have got government at the table. We have got the nonprofits at the table. We have got faith communities at the table. We have got police officers at the table, like everyone at the table to say we are going to work on this issue together. We are going to look at the data together. We are kind of bumping up from that individual agency approach to that systems approach and then individual level solutions. And for me, this is really about access and options. Making sure that people have access to a comprehensive set of services, to housing, to counseling, health care, education, and employment opportunity is like the whole package needs to be offered to people and they need to be able to kind of tailor that package to what works for them. There is no one size fits all approach. You have to have a system that has all of these pieces in place that can be tailored to each individual situation or story. It is really complicated.

Audience Question: Can you draw a connection between homelessness and climate change?

Lydia Stazen: We see a connection between homelessness and climate change more around the world than we do in Chicago right now. Looking at our colleagues in the Philippines, they are seeing a much greater increase in climate events like hurricanes, floods, etc. Following these climate events, whole villages are being washed out, wiped away, and those people that are experiencing homelessness. It is a different type of homelessness than we see here in Chicago, but it still is homelessness and needs to be addressed as we are going to start to seeing it more. I think the latest statistics out of the United Nations said something like 15 million people every year are now displaced from their homes because of these climate events.

Audience Question: On the local level climate change can also cause homelessness, just like during flooding when your home becomes inhabitable and you do not have insurance. When this happens do you become homeless?

Lydia Stazen: Absolutely, you know, it has been interesting to watch sort of a shift in the literature on this. I think for decades we would hear about sustainability and now were starting to talk about resiliency. This causes us to think about things like how do we build resilient cities that can take these shocks and bounce back to those shocks and infrastructure and housing, a huge piece of a city's or community's ability to bounce back against those shocks?

Audience Question: Could you briefly describe what the term community-wide collective impact means?

Lydia Stazen: Collective impact is a jargony term that basically says a community is coming together to tackle a particular issue and so you see this sort of cross sector approaches on an issue. Collective impact has taken five different principles. One is that you have a shared data system that all the different agencies and organizations are putting into and there's a shared goal so we are very clear on what we are trying to accomplish with ending homelessness. How are these groups communicating amongst each other to break down these silos? Think about an example we have here in Chicago. Chicago has a criminal justice system that is dealing with a lot of people who have experience with homelessness so if the criminal justice system is not at the table in those conversations about how to address that, we are not going to solve it. That is kind of the idea that collective impact brings – getting everybody working together towards a shared goal.

Audience Question: Is a cause of homelessness certain laws that are not being enforced?

Lydia Stazen: We need to make sure that we are, you know, actively working with our government with our legislators to make sure that the policies that are there are strengthened and enforced, or to create new policies and laws that can better protect people who are at risk.

Next, I want to share with you a piece of work that IGH developed with some researchers right after we started, and this is what we call our framework. This was to sort of get at the idea that yes, homelessness looks different in different communities, even in different countries around the world, but to push back against the idea that we cannot define homelessness. A lot of people will say it cannot be defined. We responded by saying yes it can, and here is what it looks like. We found you can define homelessness in ways that are globally inclusive and that are globally representative. We work with partners who work on homelessness in many, many different countries, and we came up with this framework of three different categories. [See chart² on next page for framework referenced.]

² *A Global Framework for Understanding Homelessness*, Institute of Global Homelessness, <http://ighomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/globalframeworkforunderstanding.pdf>.



A GLOBAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING **HOMELESSNESS**

The IGH Global Framework captures three broad categories of people who may be considered homeless, defined as “lacking access to minimally adequate housing.” For local definitions, countries or cities may include some of these categories and not others. Rather than a list that must be accepted in full everywhere, the Framework offers a shared vocabulary for collaboration across countries. **Within the Framework, IGH targets programs and research primarily toward those in Category 1 and in a subset of Category 2.**

People without accommodation	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation
<p>1A People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests, etc.)</p> <p>1B People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)</p> <p>1C People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport</p> <p>1D ‘Pavement dwellers’ - individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover</p>	<p>2A People staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)</p> <p>2B People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people (where occupants have a designated bed or room)</p> <p>2C Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence</p> <p>2D People living in camps provided for ‘internally displaced people’ i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders</p> <p>2E People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants</p>	<p>3A People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis</p> <p>3B People living under threat of violence</p> <p>3C People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar</p> <p>3D People squatting in conventional housing</p> <p>3E People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation</p> <p>3F People living in trailers, caravans and tents</p> <p>3G People living in extremely overcrowded conditions</p> <p>3H People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements</p>
<p>IGH FOCUS AREA IN BOLD</p>		

The first category is people without accommodation; people who have no accommodation at all. This gets kind of broken down into the subcategories. The people sleeping on the streets or in places like parks or other public spaces. People sleeping in buildings not meant for humans to live in, bus shelters, train stations, or public buildings. I think about airports, a lot of people are living at O'Hare Airport here in Chicago and also at Heathrow Airport in London. There they are living somewhere, but it was not meant for people to be living there at all. The next category is people sleeping in forms of transportation. This includes people sleeping in cars, in their rickshaws, and fishing boats. The last category was added by our colleagues in India, they particularly talk about people who are pavement dwellers. This includes people who are literally living on the street. But they constructed some kind of, almost a tent, but it is a little different from a tent. We have tent camps here in Chicago, but this is a little bit different and we wanted to reflect that aspect of global homelessness by including that as a category as well. That is really the first category, and then there are all these different manifestations of what that category can look like.

The second piece of the framework are the people living in temporary or crisis accommodation such as homeless shelters. This is people living in temporary accommodation. In the United Kingdom, they have something that they called BNB's, which to me sounds like a really charming English grandmother is going to bring you a nice English breakfast but it is really more like you have got a room with a bed and you share a bathroom with 50 people. This is not meant to be permanent, it is meant to be temporary. Other examples are domestic violence shelters, internally displaced persons camps, refugee camps, asylum seeker camps, and those sorts of things. Again, these places are meant to be temporary. A lot of times people end up staying in them for a really long time, this is really is the second category.

The third category is people who are living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation. This is where we think about people who are living with a friend. They're living with relatives sometimes called doubled up or couch surfing. This also includes people who are living in homes that maybe those homes do not have running water or electricity. Also, people who are living in their mobile home or in a really overcrowded conditions. Basically, anywhere where people are living that is severely inadequate and insecure. Here we have to really pay attention to the cultural dynamics. Some of our colleagues in Nigeria were saying, well, some of our traditional homes do not have running water or do not have electricity, and that's okay because of the cultural context. This is a category where we just need to make sure that we are checking our own cultural assumptions and listening to what the people who are in those communities need and want.

But why are these categories important? It has to do with counting. At IGH we really believe that what you state as your goal, what gets measured, what gets tracked, is what gets done. We really think that in terms of homelessness, the data needs to be a lot stronger than it is right now around the world if we are really going to end homelessness globally.

IGH has our Place to Call Home Initiative, where we have 13 cities around the world that are kind of our laboratory cities in terms of definitions and counting, and Chicago is one of those cities. We have worked with each of these cities to ask, how does your community experience homelessness? For example, we work in Rijeka, Croatia. We found they actually do not have a lot of people in the category 1(A). People do not really sleep on the streets in Rijeka the way that they do here, but they do have people who are sleeping in 1(B). Based on this, we helped them do their first street count ever of people who were in that category. Now they are going to do their next count and we are going to be able to see if that number went up or down in a year. That is how you begin the first year to refine your strategy, you know, if you are making a difference or not. And so, these cities are really important to us, to our work, and to proving a point to the U.N. that this is how you do it. This is how you solve homelessness globally, even though, yes, it can look different in each of these different communities.

Audience Question: What is your favorite information about data strategy?

Lydia Stazen: It is really messy right now. We do not actually have good data. I think certain countries have better data than others. I think the United States does okay, because we have been doing a point in time for many years. We are very clear on our definitions and we have a methodology by which we do that. In Canada, I think their counts are accurate, but their counts are extrapolations. They kind of look at the number of people applying for homelessness assistance and then they kind of guess from there how many people around Canada are experiencing homelessness. In Canada, they say they have 35,000 people who are homeless. In the United States, we say we have 560,000 people who we know are homeless in these categories. Again, that is why definitions are so important and why the counting methodology is so important. Our goal would be to have the whole world say here on the chart is who we are talking about. Here is how we count so that way we could say, oh, everybody is counting the same way and we can really begin to compare and then see over time which way we are going.

Audience Question: Do you attempt to track double-up population? If not, why not?

Lydia Stazen: Yeah, we consider that as a form of homelessness. We think it is a really important form because the most frequent response, if a person is on the street for the first time and you ask them, where did you sleep last night, a lot of times it is with a family member or a friend, and for whatever reason, they have been kicked out. That to us is a really important category when we think about how we are going to prevent people from ending up on the streets and so we do encourage people to count. But, this is where we get the most pushback. This was the pushback we were getting at the United Nations. This was the column that we did not get into the resolution that the Commission for Social Development just put out. There is incredible pushback on that category because I think governments know there are a lot of people living in that category.

But, one country that is paying attention to that category is Finland. Finland has very few people in the first column and very few people in the second column. If you talk to the people working in the sector in Finland, they say we have about 5,000 people who are homeless. If you say, "Well, I had heard that Finland ended homelessness, so tell me about these 5,000." The response is, "Oh, these are people who are living with their friends and family and actually want their own place." In Finland they have been paying attention for years to this issue and they are being very thoughtful about how they are doing it. And it ties back to the U.N. work because the last time that homelessness was meaningfully discussed at the United Nations was 1987, the last of the U.N. Habitat's International Year of Shelter before 2020, the last two weeks. That is the last time they talked about it meaningfully and that was the year Finland paid attention. These two weeks that we have just come off of this resolution that we negotiated, even though it did not get everything in there that we wanted it to do, what member states from this map are paying attention this year that are going to be successful in the future.

Audience Question: Do you think this represents their educational system?

Lydia Stazen: In Finland, they have been really thoughtful about what I would say is that collected model. Who are the players that we need at this table to look nationally at how we are going to tackle this issue? They have the right people in the rooms there. They also have a smaller population, the scale makes it a little bit easier. There are 3 million people who live in Finland. That is about the size of our city. So, we want to be thoughtful in saying it does not exactly scale up or scale down. But I think the fact that they have had a national strategy and they have been plugging away at it for 35 years. They are clear on their definitions and they regularly count. And then they are using that data to inform their strategy going forward. Thank you for the questions. I think it makes for a richer conversation.

CHICAGO LIGHTS

Good afternoon everybody. I am Jackie Lorens Harris and I am the director of the Social Service Center at Chicago Lights. Coming back to DePaul's campus always gives me some nostalgia, maybe a little bit of jitters. I am a double demon - I did my undergrad in political science and then I did my graduate degree in nonprofit management. I am a huge DePaul fan and just happy to be here with you all.

I know that Lydia shared a lot more time, data, and numbers, which really paints a great picture for what the experience of homelessness looks like in Chicago and around the globe. I am going to give you all a little bit of data as well, but I wanted to share more of a qualitative testimonial experience as well, based on the work that we do at Chicago Lights and the interactions that I have with our guests. So there are a lot of different terms that people like to use. Service providers like to see their clients as customers or patrons, but we prefer the term guest to make it more of a hospitable, welcoming environment for folks who seek out our services.

Chicago Lights is a 501(c)(3). We were founded in 1991 out of Fourth Presbyterian Church. If anybody is familiar with the church, we are that very pretty court yard church across from the Water Tower and John Hancock Building. We are located over there and we grew out of a lot of outreach programs for the Presbyterian Church. Our tutoring program at Chicago Lights, has been around for over 50 years, and that focuses on one-to-one engagement between students from 1st grade through 12th grade. The mission is to match students with a mentor for as many years as possible. There are definitely matches between students and tutors that have gone up to twelve years, which is amazing. Then we have our summer day program, which is a six-week extension of the tutoring program. We have an urban farm, which is located just west on Chicago Avenue; it's about Chicago and Hudson, if you passed the Chicago Brown line, stop West and you will see it. It's really beautiful and there are some green houses. The urban farm is focused on young adults, so usually high school age and then 18 to 24. It is for individuals who are looking to get support in education and employment preparation, career support; maybe they had some experience of some court involvement; trying to break the cycle that they've been encountering in their younger years. Then we have this dance academy, which is a an outpost program with the Chicago Public Schools, and we are located in about seven different Chicago public schools. We provide creative arts and dance programing to both middle school and high school age students, to schools that primarily do not have a creative arts program or that's been cut. And then we have the social service center. Ours is the only program that works

strictly with adults who are 18 and older. We do not have any income restrictions, any geographic restrictions or limitations except to access our food pantry. It's a little different. We welcome and have our doors open to anybody who walks in asking for support. The social service center itself has been around since 1983. It first started out as a resource for folks who are just coming off the street. If they needed maybe a pair of pants or a warm sweater, they needed to make a phone call to a family member, we looked back for some of our anniversary programs to highlight what were the services that people needed back in the late 80s and 90s. It's kind of surprising some people came and would be like getting the cheese wiz sandwich. And so it kind of is a spectrum of what people are coming in for. But obviously things have changed since the 80s and 90s and we've gone through a lot of transformation there.

I have been with Chicago Lights for almost eight years now. We have really developed more of our planning and programming away from immediate services as our core focus, which is always going to be with the Catholic social teaching, drawing, or the image of the two feet of Catholic social justice – there's charity and direct service and there's social justice. You need both feet on the ground to balance. And obviously we know that that's the case for our program as well. People are always going to be coming in and asking for food, clothing, and some hygiene. They are going to be looking to make a phone call to receive mail with us, and we will always provide that to an extent. But what we have been trying to move more towards is looking at the systemic causes of homelessness and poverty, which we talked about. And that's through our case management and our support programs, our traditional support groups. We have a few different ways we do that. We offer one on one case management. So think of it as having a mentor or a coach and folks who are wanting to gain more stability or their housing situation, their employment. If they have some hurdles with mental or physical health or a hurdle in terms of legal services, anything and everything, we basically want to help somebody on their journey towards stability.

Something I talked about with Dan and Heather in preparation for this is the way in which we do it, I find it is really harkens back to the way that St. Vincent and our Vincentian convention calls for it. We are walking along on a journey with a guest and they are they are leading us. We are never going to say, I think you should be doing this or this is the next best step for you or you know what, I really don't think you should go to this job fair or anything like that. We may troubleshoot and brainstorm some options, but we really know that deep down, each of us is the best expert on our lives and we're the authors of our own lives. So we want to make sure that our guests feel that they can be on that journey. They are guiding us through what that journey looks like. Because everybody, every story that walks

through our door is very unique. There is no template. There is no one size fits all, as you all know from meeting friends, family, community members. So we definitely put that into our programming and into our services that we want people to have a choice. People come in and say, well, tell me, what should I do? What am I supposed to be doing here? I want you to do what you do and make sure I get housing. And this is you know, this is a partnership. You need to know that you're going to be with us on that path. We want to make sure that we are definitely there to listen and help guide and troubleshoot if we need to. But we know that the person who's walking into our service center is giving you the person; taking the lead, taking the reins.

In terms of additional support services beyond an individual level, we also know that community and peer support is really huge. Something that I discovered while working at Chicago Lights is the community that folks build among peers who are going through similar experiences. Obviously they are coming from very different backgrounds, very different life experiences, and may be coming from very different parts of the country. But they find themselves struggling by themselves in a space that they don't know that they can necessarily get out on their own. So we provide opportunities for folks to meet one another through peer support groups. And we offer this on a weekly basis that can be through meditation mindfulness, conflict resolution skills, employment skills, computer literacy, housing navigation, what to look for in terms of being a tenant in Chicago, what are your rights, and what should you be looking out for in terms of any red flags that might you see in a landlord or property management. We want to make sure that people are well equipped in those areas and we see the same people coming back week after week. So obviously it's a space that they feel comfortable, they feel welcome to come in, but they also are building that partnership with one another and readily sharing resources with each other, and back to us saying, you know, I heard about this job fair, I heard about this waitlist that is opening up. We often rely on our guests to give us information. We are not the experts. We are just the ones who are distributing that information. Sometimes we learn about it first, but we really want it to be a mutual conversation. So that's a little bit about what we do.

I did want to first reflect back on what Lydia has said about the definition of homelessness. Unfortunately, the HUD definition of homelessness does not include, like Lydia said, anybody who is doubled up or living with another individual. I do not know of any service provider in Chicago that does not consider that homelessness. The unfortunate thing is that in order to be entered into a lot of these city based housing databases, in order to get housing, you need to select what your current living situation is. More times than not, I am hearing people either experiencing homelessness as a mix of on the street or on public transportation, or

staying with a friend or family couch surfing. Unfortunately, that is not one of the fields that comes up when you are working in that database. So it does become tricky when you are explaining to somebody saying, “Look, you know what? According to this data, you are not experiencing homelessness. You are okay.” Which is really hard to share with somebody. The reason that it is more difficult is because service providers that rely on HUD funding, they have to do a point in time count, which is done usually on the coldest day of the year, in January, usually late January in Chicago. And they only count the people who are experiencing homelessness by those who are in the following places; they reach out to all the hospitals, shelters, police stations, and then service providers and volunteers go out into the community during the night. I have done it myself. It's a very interesting experience. They are interested in doing that 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. And you literally count the people who are experiencing homelessness, at least for that night. Once you collect that data, get a little bit more of an assessment to see if that person is either a veteran, see that person has any physical or mental health diagnoses, and include that information, then that's all given back to the city of Chicago for the full time counts and that's given back to HUD. Then HUD distributes federal funding based on that number. In a sense, they are not distributing the funds to all these service providers based on the real number of people experiencing homelessness. Thus, we are kind of already falling behind in terms of what we are receiving from federal grants and how we can combat this ongoing cycle.

JACKIE LORENS HARRIS Q&A

Audience Question: Can we talk about a little about things in the system that keep people in this homeless state and what can be done to change it?

Jackie Lorens Harris: Sure, Lydia is our expert, she shared a lot of this, but I will echo. Most of the time it's systemic, it's really systemic.

And, yes, individual choice does come into play. But I often see that being an effect of extending homelessness more often than not. So some of the things that perpetuate the state of homelessness in our system are racism and our court system.

So two facts right there. African-Americans are eight times more likely in Illinois to experience homelessness than folks that are White. That is one big stark contrast. The fact that African American are 14% of the Illinois population, but 59% of the homeless population. And the reason for that is systems that perpetuate you know, racism, gentrification, housing discrimination, folks who have maybe been part of a foster care system. I see a lot of generational homelessness, unfortunately. A lot of folks who have young teens who they know as soon as they turn 18, they unfortunately can't be included on mom or dad's lease because they're in supportive housing and they are not allowed to have two adults in the house. So they have to find another way. A lot of the ways that the systems are set up is just always against the people who already have to handle all these hurdles and are already battling all these systems that are perpetuating it. You know, another thing that comes to play is mental illness. It does happen, obviously, on an individual level. But if you look at it systemically in Illinois, you all remember the budget that passed a few years ago. That was fun. So Chicago. It is very lucky that we don't receive any government funding.

We are all privately funded, which is awesome. But so many of our partner agencies are funded by government funding. There are about two or three, I would say reputable mental health facilities, long term mental health residencies left in Illinois because of the cuts and the closures of mental health institutions and organizations like Thresholds. And to see for a trilogy, they have had to cut either their services, their staff, or all of the above. They've had to close full programs completely. So folks who were receiving this care and they were receiving housing or they're receiving medication and regular counseling have nowhere to turn. And an article that I always love to quote and reflect on is something from the *Atlantic*, and it was a huge, long, description of the Cook County jail system. So the Cook County jail system was jammed packed few years ago and is currently the largest mental health

provider in Illinois. So, like most people who are receiving mental health services are doing it because they're in jail. And so why? If a person is already experiencing mental illness and they are released from prison; they're not getting the treatment that they can get because all those programs are gone. Unfortunately, some of our other systems like the police and authorities are kind of pushing back against the kind of help that folks with mental need, of course there will be recidivism. So they're coming back into the system as well. There's a lot of systemic factors at play that the individual is privy, too.