

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence.

The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (and more than 90 of our previous interview programs and special programs at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the TV programs link to reach www.olympiafor.org/tv_programs.htm, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch.

Many of our website's TV program listings also include a .pdf document describing the program.

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“Solving HOMELESSNESS PROBLEMS in New Ways:

A SYSTEMS APPROACH

by GLEN ANDERSON, PRODUCER AND HOST of this TV SERIES

The greater Olympia and Thurston County areas have recently been addressing the homelessness problems in more thoughtful and comprehensive ways. On the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's June 2013 TV program, three guests dispel the misunderstandings that have impaired public discussions. Our guests also lay out some of the positive new directions for helping homeless people more effectively. **See contact information for these guests and several great non-profit organizations at the end of this article.**

We begin with a clearer understanding of **who** is homeless and **why**. The stereotypes are not accurate. Poverty and homelessness are common also in rural areas, besides downtown.

People need to understand also that large-scale homeless is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. During the Great Depression of the 1930s many people became homeless. But from the 1940s to the mid-1970s, economic prosperity reduced the problem significantly. When Ronald Reagan was Governor of California in the 1970s he slashed funding for mental hospitals and discharged patients into the community, but he refused to fund community-based mental health services, so homelessness exploded in California.

In the U.S., real wages started declining in about 1976, which started increasing poverty again. When Reagan became President in 1981, his budget priorities made the problem worse. The trends have continued with further shrinking wages, sending American jobs overseas, and underfunding social services and low-income housing. These trends have thrown more people into poverty, and the 2008 crash of banks and Street made things even worse.

Poverty pushes people into homelessness – and often into mental illness. Likewise, mental illness can push people into poverty and homelessness.

Both poverty and mental illness carry social stigma, which only make these problems worse and prevent people from honestly discussing their problems.

All of these factors isolate people from others and lead to loneliness and other problems, including “self-medicating” with drugs or alcohol to ease the pain or provide temporary escapes.

Local governments have traditionally focused on judging and punishing people (*e.g.*, with local ordinances that ban homeless behaviors such as “loitering” and sitting on sidewalks and meeting their bathroom needs when they do not have access to bathrooms).

Governments from the federal to local level have traditionally focused on separate aspects of the problem and separate constituencies (youths, veterans, alcoholics, etc.) without seeing interrelated needs and opportunities for comprehensive problem-solving. Local social service agencies have not cooperated and coordinated vigorously or creatively enough.

The small amount of data collection focused mostly on **inputs** (*e.g.*, numbers of bed nights and numbers of meals) rather than **outcomes** (*e.g.*, numbers persons placed in stable housing situations).

Over the years, some models and methods have shown real respect for the human dignity and human needs of people who don’t have a place to live. The Catholic Worker model of welcoming, nonjudgmental hospitality has persisted nationwide since the 1930s. Olympia’s Bread and Roses is an example of that. For a few years Olympia’s Camp Quixote homeless encampment has provided a sense of community and connection, which are just as important as a place to sleep. Camp Quixote is not a social service agency, but a real community that the residents govern through direct democracy. The Panza Board is an equal partner with the residents’ council in helping it succeed and thrive.

A few years ago I was attending an event about peace and social justice near Seattle, and an official from King County spoke enthusiastically about their new priority of getting a place to live for every chronically homeless person as the **first** step, without waiting to cure their alcoholism or control mental illness or deal with other problems. We’re moving toward that approach in Thurston County. In Seattle, research showed that when chronically homeless people settled into stable housing, they were able to stabilize other parts of their lives and sharply reduce their use of alcohol and drugs. Also, they needed fewer police interactions and hospitalizations, so money was saved.

Many other people encounter temporary difficulties and need housing money for just a little while to avoid becoming homeless. A “rapid re-housing” effort can provide small amounts of money to re-stabilize those individuals or families and prevent homelessness and escalating problems. This “rapid re-housing” is a flexible response to specific situations, rather than a “one-size-fits-all” program.

For a number of years the multiplicity of agencies and programs confused the public and interfered with effectiveness. Now Thurston County is using a new “systems approach.” It clarifies which agencies are best suited for which roles, and it allows for one point of entry for single adults (SideWalk), one entry point for families (Family Support Center), and one entry point for youths (Community Youth Services). A person can visit the appropriate agency and connect efficiently with relevant resources and services. The various agencies are collaborating better now, and will continue to do so. One next step will be to figure out how to provide coordinated services to the rural parts of Thurston County.

Another next step is to identify the gaps and to devise new interventions to fill those gaps. Theresa Slusher, Thurston County’s Homeless Coordinator, is working on this. She is collaborating with various nontraditional partners, including businesses, police and social service providers.

Many homeless shelters around the country and locally exclude people who are drunk or have other problems. Those people usually have no other option than to sleeping on a sidewalk or in the woods. Also, overnight shelters typically force people to leave before breakfast-time, so people have nowhere to go during the day.

Therefore, one gap we need to fill is the need for a 24-hour-a-day, 7-days-a-week shelter, without the usual limitations on eligibility. This 24/7 shelter would be a multi-service resource offering meals, a drop-in day center, laundry, shower, mailing address, phone message center, and some optional social services. It needs to be a “low-barrier” shelter because many homeless people do not meet the strict criteria and rules that some shelters

impose. This would help people get off the streets and into a safe space where they could meet their basic needs, including normal social interactions.

Another goal is to help people with short-term help (e.g., prevention, diversion or shelter) within 24 hours.

Theresa said that 70% of persons leaving shelter are leaving for unknown destinations. She is working to help connect people with more stable destinations.

Selena talked about the goal of stabilizing each person's housing situation within 30 days. Only after someone has the security of a place to be during the day and during the night can the person stabilize himself or herself enough to start planning for transitioning into the future.

Some people have additional special needs that require more than simply housing. People with special needs might need "supportive housing" that provides social support, services, or other arrangements.

Part of the problem, of course, is that while wages have declined since the mid-1970s, the price of housing has escalated to high, unaffordable levels. Many people simply cannot afford to pay the amount of rent that is typically charged for houses or apartments.

For a variety of reasons, a growing number of young people can no longer live at home. They end up on the streets and in risky situations. We need more shelter space so young people can be safe, and additional services to help young people grow into responsible, self-controlled adults. A "youth bridge program" will help young people develop and learn, because they need more specialized services to meet their particular needs.

For many purposes, we need to gather, track, and analyze meaningful data, so we can have a feedback loop on the needs, the services we provide, and the results. Theresa is working on this. The "Homeless Management Information System" compiles data from all providers. She and others can look at HMIS and understand what's going on in the whole system.

The Olympia FOR's June 2013 TV program also helps viewers understand that dealing effectively with homelessness requires that we also deal effectively with the issues that are interrelated with not having a place to live. These include alcohol, drugs, mental health, a youthful age.

Mainstream conversations about homeless typically ignore the larger issues of a dysfunctional economy that has been squeezing people at the bottom, emphasizing "free trade" deals that urge U.S. employers to eliminate jobs here and move jobs overseas. Indeed, when governments, mainstream media and the general public discuss homelessness, they often do it in a way that blames the victims and fail to put the problem into the context of excessive unemployment, seriously declining wages, poverty itself, and related social and economic justice concerns.

We wrapped up the conversation with more information about Camp Quixote's plan to build a permanent community called "Quixote Village." This will be 30 tiny cottages, each sized at about 144 square feet and including a toilet and sink. The large community building will have a community kitchen, showers, an office, and a multi-purpose conference room. Camp residents devised the plan and worked directly with the architects. They sought the best balance between privacy and community. The location near the edge of an industrial area near Mottman Road in the SW Olympia/Tumwater area is acceptable to the residents. Thurston County provided land. Their "Quixote Village" will meet all building codes and cost about half of the national average for housing homeless persons. Many volunteers are helping, and they will need more for construction, painting, sewing curtains, landscaping, etc. For information see www.quixotevillage.com

Looking back in our local community, I recognize that some of the best progress we've made has occurred when people took bold steps based on humane principles. Often bold nonviolent action seems necessary to raise the moral issues and to prompt governments and other mainstream entities into doing what is right. Examples:

- When two Catholic Workers visited Olympia and met with some of us to explore whether they should start a Catholic Worker house of hospitality here. It became Bread and Roses.

- When a meeting about providing services to homeless people ended with one man's concern for where he would sleep that night. Pastor Sam Hochstatter from First Baptist Church offered hospitality there that continued for several years.
- When a nonviolent encampment in Sylvester Park and vigorous community organizing by homeless people and their allies created the moral and political pressure that converted the Fleetwood Building into a homeless shelter.
- When some homeless people camped out for several days and nights in a downtown vacant lot owned by the City of Olympia. While the City was trying to evict them, the Unitarian Church in West Olympia offered space on its grounds. That became Camp Quixote.
- When just recently people took nonviolent direct action to sit on sidewalks, camp near City Hall, and set up temporary shelters on public land downtown to lift up the moral urgency to provide shelter for homeless persons.

Shouldn't we recognize the basic human right for every person to have a place to live?

Local individuals, nonprofit organizations, and governments are pushing ahead in better ways.

They need support from those of us who are willing to volunteer and from those of us who are willing to pay taxes to protect everyone's basic human rights.

Please watch the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's June 2013 TV program. You'll discover new information, new insights, and new hope that we can be more effective in helping people who do not yet have decent places to live. Our guests are Selena Kilmoyer, Theresa Slusher, and Jill Severn.

- **Selena Kilmoyer** has worked for many years to meet the needs of people who don't have places to live, and for young people and others at risk. When she came to Olympia she worked with Bread and Roses, the local House of Hospitality (www.breadandrosesolympia) based on the Catholic Worker model. She has worked with other agencies as well.
- **Theresa Slusher** is the Homeless Coordinator for Thurston County from the spring of 2012 through March 31, 2014. She has more than 18 years of experience working on homeless issues, and she has significantly helped our local community address the problems in an effective and well organized way. Contact her at coordinatethurston@gmail.com
- **Jill Severn** served a number of years as president of the board working with Camp Quixote, the homeless encampment that is self-governed and has operated very effectively for several years. Camp Quixote has moved every few months from one church parking lot to another, and now it is planning for a permanent location in the SW Olympia – Tumwater area with small cottages. Contact www.QuixoteVillage.com

Additional resources:

- **SideWalk** is at 1139 5th Ave SE, Olympia (just west of the big First United Methodist Church), (360) 515-5587, www.walkthurston.org
- **Family Support Center** is at the NW corner of State & Capitol Way in downtown Olympia, 754-9297 or 528-8999
- **Quixote Village:** See information at www.quixotevillage.com
- **Bread and Roses** can be reached at (360) 754-4085, www.breadandrosesolympia.org