



Oklahoma

HOMELESS RESOURCES

THE OKLAHOMA HOMELESS RESOURCES PROJECT

OCTOBER 2022

This document outlines the plans, goals, and mission of the Oklahoma Homeless Resources Project and the Oklahoma Homeless Resources website.

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OKHomeless.com

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MakingTheImpact.com

*“No matter who you are, what your position is, or how much money you make,
you have the power to make a difference.” –Lisa Li*

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Summary

The Oklahoma Homeless Resources Project is an initiative designed to tackle the homelessness crisis through the collaboration of city, commercial, non-profit, church, and individual efforts.

The way it will achieve this is different from existing efforts and it will not necessarily have direct involvement in facilitating or organizing such collaboration.

This project is part of an informal, loosely organized, grassroots movement seeking to inspire positive changes and transformation in the entire population of Oklahoma and beyond. It is an effort to motivate all people to work together and independently to reduce (and hopefully eliminate) homelessness, prevent families from becoming homeless, and resolve many other community issues that we face today.

This document gives an overview of the crisis and identifies many of the problems with current strategies and presents an alternative solution. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the crisis or any other, as every entity, individual, situation, and community is different. Therefore, it presents a set of suggested actions cities, businesses, non-profits, churches, and individuals can take that are adjustable and simply serve as a spark to ignite the fires of your own creativity and initiative.

“The next level opens only after your next committed step. No matter how small you start, start something that matters.” – Brendon Burchard

We all have core human needs that must be met for us to find happiness in life.
One of those needs is the need to contribute:

“When we feel as though we’re contributing to the world, we gain a profound sense of meaning and purpose. In fact, contribution itself is the source of meaning and purpose in our lives. If we’ve contributed something significant to the world, we feel that our time here was meaningful, that it mattered. And if we know that we are contributing now and planning to contribute in the future, then we feel we are living a life of purpose.” (Burchard, 2012)

By meeting the core human needs while nurturing, teaching, and inspiring people to contribute to society, everyone will benefit. The effect can ripple across communities, cities, the entire state, across the country, and even around the world.

The Homelessness Crisis

Homelessness across the US is increasing, as reported in July by the New York Times (Lopez, 2022), and while statistically the numbers appear to be down in Oklahoma, more homeless are appearing on the street (Williams, 2022). With inflation expected to increase, economic forecasts predicting the world will be in a global recession in 2023 (Movement, 2022), and wages unable to keep up with rising living costs (Egan, 2022), homelessness is likely to increase in Oklahoma as more people struggle to survive.

No one benefits from homelessness. The homeless themselves suffer the most from the situation, but it also affects the areas and people around them.

Some businesses deal with homeless individuals hanging around their establishment. The presence of homeless people may deter customers from shopping there, which in turn hurts the business' profitability. Customers may also avoid a location if they are continuously hassled by homeless begging for money. The homeless may also dig through their trash, look for opportunities to steal food or other items, and pose a risk to the general safety of employees and customers. If the homeless are using drugs, this can result in drug paraphernalia being left behind where someone, including children, may come across it and be injured by it.

Individuals may be discouraged from wanting to shop, work, and live in areas that have a lot of homeless congregating. One example of this can be seen in California ("Rising Homelessness Is Tearing California Cities Apart," 2022). It can make people feel unsafe and uncomfortable, which discourages the positive contributors to society from remaining in those locations. As they leave, the area will fall further into decline. Homelessness impacts property values, the neighborhood aesthetic, and discourages businesses from setting up shop in areas with a lot of homeless issues.

It also puts a great strain on the charities that help the homeless and low-income people in those areas. As the need increases, the donations they rely on often do not increase with it. This places a great burden on them as they try to meet the needs of the community while lacking the resources and funding needed to serve them.

The Government Can't Fix Everything

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) often funds housing projects in an effort to address the lack of affordable housing. While federal and state agencies along with cities are doing their best to provide shelter and resources to the homeless within their borders, demand always exceeds what is available.

Furthermore, federal, state, and local governments are bogged down by regulations, budgetary limitations, and lots of red tape. It can be very slow to act and whatever action it takes is usually costly, inadequate, inefficient, and ultimately ineffective in solving the problem long-term. For example, if someone is in dire need of immediate assistance, unless the government has already established and funded a program to address their issue and that person meets certain requirements, the government will not help them.

The government – be it city, state, or federal – can't solve the homelessness crisis alone because it is not what government was originally designed to do. The government was established “to protect people from conflicts and to provide law and order” (The Purposes of Government [ushistory.org], n.d.), not to provide social welfare. Instead, people originally relied on their communities for support.

According to a new video report by John Stossel who interviewed Arthur Brooks, “60% of Americans take more out of the public finance system than they pay in. They get more in public services than they pay in taxes” (Stossel, 2022).

A 7-year welfare recipient, Star Parker says “It's so much easier to take than to make. I never even thought about it. I think that that's one of the greatest tragedies of becoming a taker is you don't think about that somebody else had to make this” (Stossel, 2022).

Even if every tax dollar was put towards helping the homeless, it would not make the problem disappear, for no dollar amount would ever be enough to satisfy the need. The reason comes down to human nature. People do not appreciate what they do not work hard for.

When most people receive some form of assistance regularly, at first, they will appreciate it and value it, but over time as they come to depend on it, they will feel entitled to it. The lack of gratitude is even higher when it comes to government assistance. Most people assume it is the government's responsibility to help the poor and the homeless, resulting in demands for action by the government, instead of attempting to address the issues at the community level.

Many government programs provide a lot of benefits that help families with housing, food, medical care, childcare, and more (Sherman, Trisi and Parrott, 2013). Government assistance programs are especially important to low-income families, people with disabilities, seniors, and parents. Yet, despite the existence of these benefits, there are people still in need. They may not qualify, there may be long waiting lists, or the resources simply run out. Whenever new government assistance becomes available people always rush to apply. While the government often assumes the reason people apply is out of need, it is more likely that it is more out of opportunity.

While government assistance helps a lot of people, non-government assistance can be more impactful and inspire change in the homeless. For example, if a homeless man received a benefits card from the government and a hundred-dollar bill from a stranger, the homeless man is going to be more grateful to the stranger. The reason is quite simple.

The stranger didn't have to give the man anything, but he willingly chose to. Whereas the government is essentially forced to provide assistance. Government assistance is expected and is always seen as inadequate, thus there is far less gratitude for it than the assistance from the stranger. Non-government assistance can also be more expedient as there may be fewer regulations and red tape procedures that must be dealt with before rendering aid.

Human Nature and the Welfare Cliff

There is another dynamic to this situation that must also be considered. Studies have shown that most people will follow the path of least resistance (Beaten, 2017). Here is one example that was shared in the article authored by Beaten:

“Getting promoted is difficult to do. Rather than say, ‘This is hard but worth it,’ we sometimes convince ourselves that we should just get a new job—which is often, all said and done, easier than sticking it out through the hard, vertical climb. Taking the path of least resistance can come in the form of rationalization, denial, or distraction.” (Beaten, 2017)

Beaten further explained, “A minority of the study participants chose to ‘change their actions rather than take the path of least resistance.’” This makes sense when we consider that the expansion of government assistance since 2020 has led to most recipients taking longer to find work and remaining dependent on assistance until cut off (Foundation for Government Accountability, 2021).

Attempts to curb assistance dependency involve work requirements and income caps for assistance. While this may help motivate people to find work, it does not lift them out of poverty or solve the root problem. Here is an excerpt from a 2016 article:

“One of the tragedies of America today is that so many adults of sound mind and body do not support themselves and their families. It’s a tragedy not because they suffer material want; indeed, relatively few suffer so, because government assistance satisfies many of their material needs. It’s tragic because one of the keys to human happiness is earned self-respect, which requires, as Charles Murray has written, making one’s own way in the world. The vast majority of poor people don’t want welfare; they don’t want handouts; they want a good job with which they can support themselves and their families comfortably. The tragedy of the American welfare system is that it traps so many people in dependency on government, by hindering them from getting on and climbing up the job ladder, and thereby earning self-respect and happiness. Welfare cliffs are of course not the only reason so many capable Americans languish in partial dependency on government assistance. Dreadful government schools in poor areas and systematic obstacles to getting a job, such as minimum wage laws and occupational licensing laws, are also to blame. But the perverse incentives of America’s welfare system really hurt.” (Baetjer, 2016)

By highlighting this information, it is not a call to abolish or reduce welfare, nor to impose dramatic changes to it. This is brought forth to help provide insight into the issues with current assistance programs so that better strategies and solutions can be formulated to address these issues, including the things that are outside of our control.

Motivating and Equipping People for Self-Sufficiency

A combination of strategies can be used to help make self-sufficiency the path of least resistance. Research has shown that people are motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, and the absence or lack of one can affect levels of motivation and the outcome (Murayama, 2018).

Intrinsic motivators include things like interest, hope, goals, and personal desire for success. Extrinsic motivators include things such as money and material items. While motivators differ from person-to-person, we should take these things into account when formulating a plan to assist people who are not making progress towards self-sufficiency.

Individuals must take responsibility for their own actions and choices, otherwise they will never become self-sufficient, positive contributors to society. Change is difficult for everyone, so we usually resist it. This is why it is difficult to break addictive habits, lose weight, and stick to new year resolutions. It requires awareness, willingness to change, determination, persistence, confidence, and hope. These are all things people in dire situations often lack because they typically lack the emotional and mental support network, along with the lack of resources needed to overcome their situation.

The Mental Health Crisis

Another key part of the issue is the widespread mental health crisis. The rate of suicides in Oklahoma have increased since the pandemic, with depression and anxiety being the leading causes of suicide (Bryen, 2022). The mental health crisis has two major impacts on the homeless situation.

Obviously, it impacts the homeless by making it hard to be motivated to make necessary changes to become self-sufficient. For example, a homeless man may take a \$20 bill and buy alcohol to drink away their worries for a while than to use it towards buying food.

There is a secondary impact that most likely have not considered. The mental health crisis also impacts the people that could donate or volunteer to help the homeless. Given how widespread the issue is, it is potentially impacting the amount of donations and resources non-profits serving the homeless receive. Someone who is suffering from depression will likely be more focused on their own situation and unable to consider that of others.

Those who are depressed are unlikely to be motivated to accel in life, as they lack hope that things will ever become better. They may also be less likely to help others, make donations, or volunteer as they will be more focused on their personal situation than that of others.

So not only do we have a problem with the homeless struggling with depression, but those who are able to help them as well. To overcome both the homelessness and mental health crisis, we must build people up to where they have the will and desire to overcome their challenges and become positive contributors to society.

Turning a Problem into an Opportunity

If we ever want to resolve this growing crisis, we first need to change our perspective. Instead of seeing homelessness as a problem, we should see it as an **opportunity** - an economic, community, and personal growth opportunity – and one that can have far-reaching impacts in other areas.

When we look at the homeless, we need to see their unique personality and potential. These are human beings who have skills, experience, and value, but all of that has been masked through their appearance and dire situation. The homeless are individuals who have the capacity for greatness under the right circumstances. They can grow from a seed into a great tree if they are planted in the right soil and cared for properly – if they are willing.

Of course, no one can be forced into receiving assistance, nor should they be. They must want it and desire it. For them to do that, they need to have hope again. They need to be able to see a positive future. But before they can be expected to change, we ourselves must change first.

If we can recognize the hidden potential and possibilities of the problem, we can transform it into an opportunity that is beneficial to all on a wide scale. Businesses across Oklahoma can benefit, non-profits and charities can get the resources they need, and so much more.

To understand how this is possible, we must start from the beginning.

The homeless people all have needs, just like every other person on the planet. They need food, shelter, clothing, jobs, utilities, and other essentials. Typically, all these things can be acquired from the various suppliers, property owners, and service providers.

Of course, someone who is homeless, typically does not have the financial means to afford these things, which is why they are homeless in the first place. Low-income families also share these needs as well. Because there are finite resources, such things are not and cannot be free. There is always someone paying for it.

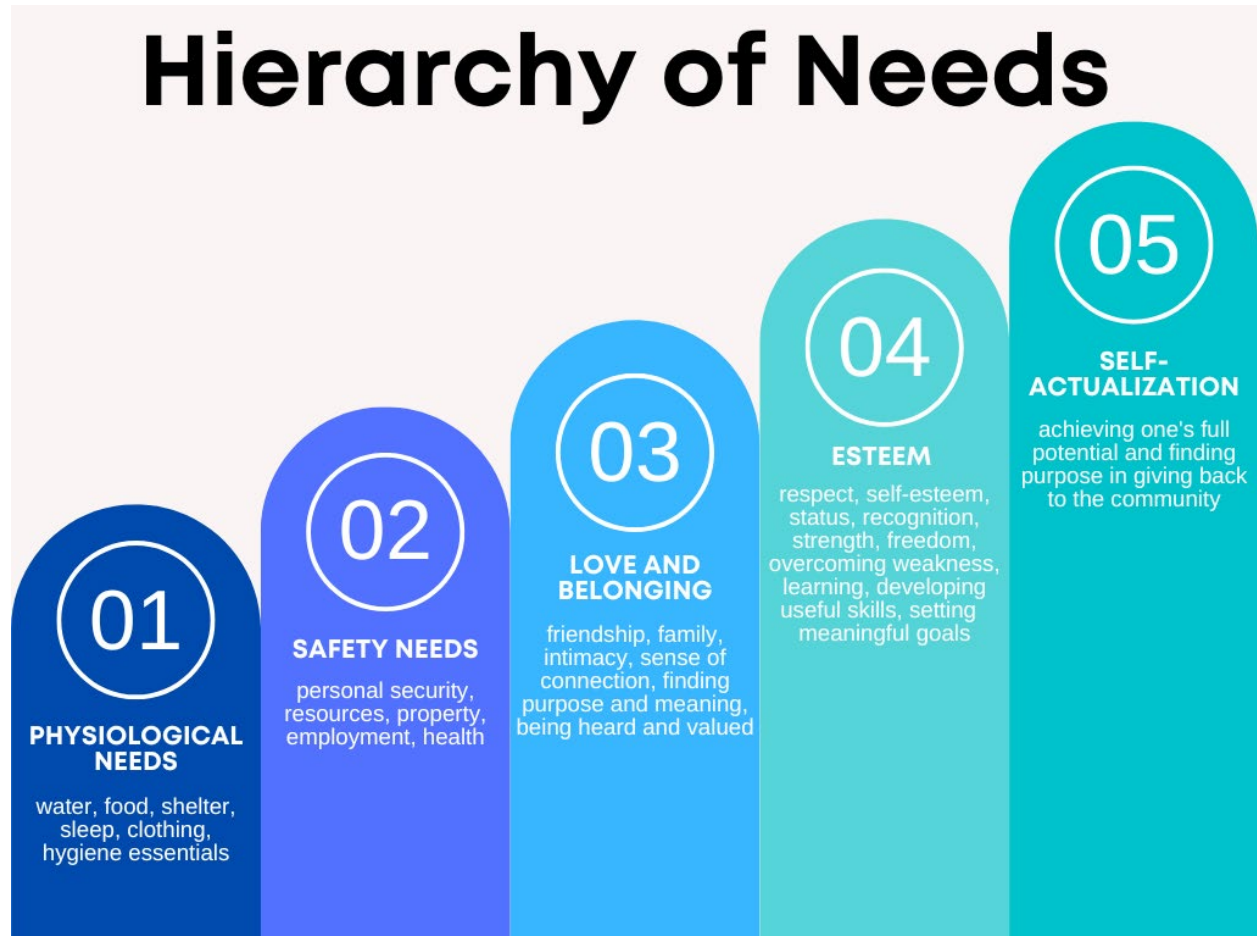
Businesses must remain profitable so that they can continue to operate. Non-profits, churches, and various charities must bring in enough funding and resources to meet the need in their communities. Individuals must be able to afford their own needs and have the ability to give their time, money, and resources to others. Government agencies must have the funding paid from taxes to pay for the benefits they distribute. Each must have excess so that they can give.

Furthermore, the effort and resources spent providing for the homeless will be in vain if those who receive the assistance do not manage to overcome their circumstances and make all the necessary changes in their lives so that they can become self-sufficient contributors. Those who do not change will be dependent on taxpayer-funded and donor-provided assistance for their survival.

To be successful, everything must be balanced so that three things happen:

- 1) No person or entity carries the burden alone,
- 2) Each person that receives assistance is transformed into a contributor, and
- 3) Those who provide assistance are supported, encouraged, and enabled to continue to do so.

If we want to see real success, we must address the hierarchy of needs in not just the homeless, but all people. By addressing all the core human needs, we dramatically increase the chance that people will become self-sufficient and willing contributors because they will want to be – not because they are forced.



SOURCE: Canva – edited version of the “Hierarchy of Needs” graphic, original version was by an unknown creator

When all our needs are met, we are happier and can give from a more genuine spirit of charity and kindness. That spirit and attitude is expressed through smiles, body language, and action which are noticed and felt by the recipients.

In an episode of the hit TV show, *Friends*, two characters, Phoebe and Joey, argued about good deeds (Helen, 2013). Joey argued that there is “no unselfish good deed” because when you do something good for others it can make you feel good, therefore, you are getting something out of it. Phoebe failed to prove him wrong in the end.

Whether or not there are actually “selfless good deeds” is not the point. In most cases, we feel good when we do things for others. It serves as a natural reward for doing something good for others,

especially when we see how it positively affects them. Being able to contribute help us to feel like we have value and purpose, so it is one of our own needs that helps us to feel fulfillment in life.

Fitting the Pieces Together

When we think about the hierarchy of needs and how those needs can be fulfilled, what may come to mind are all the people, businesses, churches, non-profits, and others that help fulfill these needs in our own lives. Our society is designed to cater to these needs in one way or another.

Every business, non-profit, church, ministry, and government is doing something that provides one or more products and/or services that address one or more of these needs in some fashion – some may be healthier options than others – but the point is the system is already there.

Here is a list of some examples:

- Rental property owners and management companies provide shelter
- Manufacturers and distributors provide food and other essential items
- Restaurants prepare food for immediate consumption
- Financial advisors provide debt management, financial planning, and financial security
- Churches provide social interaction, friendship, and guidance in personal and spiritual development
- Motivation coaches, career counselors, and spiritual development coaches provide mentorship and guidance to meet goals
- Counselors and mental health clinics provide treatments for depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues

The framework is already there, what we need to do is expand on it and use it to provide more opportunities for everyone paired with the encouragement and logical reasoning to do something positive – not just for the homeless, but our community and all of Oklahoma.

We need a spirit of giving to take place of the self-centric, materialistic focus that has gripped our society. Instead of elevating self, we should try to elevate each other, teach, and live with gratitude, and find ways to help each other. If we don't, we not only deprive others of the value that we could provide, but we also deprive ourselves of the rewards and opportunities that we would receive from it.

How It Works

“With the hands of many, the burden is light.” — Lisa Li

The core idea behind this movement is that there is great power when small actions are made by many people. A great visual representation of this in action is how the Amish will move a barn. If a handful of people try to carry the barn, the weight of it is too great and it cannot be moved. However, with a community joining together and moving as one, the barn is moved easily.



SOURCE: YOUTUBE SCREENSHOT - MOUNT VERNON NEWS

With a community of hands to help support it, the weight of the barn is spread out and distributed so that the weight is bearable for each person. This makes it so the barn can then be moved to its new location, all without the use of any machinery. Like the Amish carrying a barn, with the support of people, churches, communities, businesses, non-profits, and cities across the state, the burden of homelessness and other issues can be carried easily.

While everyone working together would be ideal, it is not realistic. There are numerous roadblocks that would need to be overcome to achieve such cooperation and unity. While complete unity may not be achieved, greater unity can be within regions, blocks, communities, or neighborhoods. Even independent actions can help when they are done with consideration to other efforts in the area.

Currently many of the efforts being made by churches, non-profits, and ministries serving the homeless are done independent of any collaboration with other resources or businesses in the area. Such efforts could be more impactful when joined by complementary or similar efforts.

In the pages that follow, we will look at some of the possible ways all of us can be involved and how we can work together to address homelessness across the entire state.

The Purpose of the Resource Directory

One of the intentions of the Oklahoma Homeless Resources Project is to assist cities, churches, businesses, non-profits, and individuals in collaborating to address the homelessness crisis. To coordinate and facilitate the distribution and transportation of people and resources where they are needed most, the existing resources must first be known and discoverable. This led to the creation of the resource directory on the Oklahoma Homeless Resources website (OKHomeless.com).

Oklahoma Homeless Resources is a non-profit website that primarily functions as a searchable directory of resources for the homeless and low-income families. Homeless individuals and families use the website to find resources, information, guidance, and more to help with their immediate and long-term needs. The secondary purpose of the website is to serve as a tool to be used by those who are helping the homeless.

The website also serves another very important purpose – it gives us insight into where and what resources are currently available. We can then identify the locations that have need but lack the resources and create plans to address it using a variety of strategies.

Despite the newness of the site, the OKHomeless.com directory has already been helping individuals across the state find resources, with around 150 visits in the month of September alone, and those numbers are increasing. The number of visits to the site has already doubled in the past two weeks compared to the same timeframe last month. This increase is in part from those interested in helping the homeless visiting the website.

This metric as well as the verbal and written messages received over the past few months suggest that there is a lot of interest in the project, which means there may be enough energy and momentum from Oklahomans for the movement to be a success.

Businesses

Businesses play a critical role in helping to address the needs of the community through the products and services they provide, as well as providing employment opportunities.

Businesses can contribute to their community in a variety of ways, such as:

- Contributing their time (or employees time) as a volunteer
- Making donations (financial, products, and/or services) to non-profits or ministries that help the homeless
- Offering discounted/free products or services to non-profits that help the homeless or directly to the homeless individuals themselves
- Providing employment opportunities to homeless individuals enrolled in recovery programs
- Displaying posters or other promotional materials to create awareness of homeless resources
- Encouraging customers to make donations to non-profit organizations that help the homeless
- Referring homeless individuals by their storefront to resources in their area

- Rendering assistance directly to homeless individuals
- Providing some form of transportation for the homeless to be taken to a shelter
- Hosting an event for the community to either teach something or create awareness

Some of the benefits businesses may have as a result include:

- Increased sales and customer base as people are encouraged to shop at and support businesses that help the community
- Free advertising, good publicity, and more awareness of their business and brand
- Earning the consumer loyalty of the homeless who may choose to purchase from their business when they are self-sufficient
- New employees that can fill vacancies
- New customers who may be involved with efforts that help the homeless (ie. non-profit organizations, churches, etc.)

Every business can play a role, for most typically provide for one or more of the core human needs we all have. Virtually every business has something to offer and could help the homeless in one or more of the ways listed on the previous page.

“There are 358,647 small businesses in Oklahoma that account for 99.4% of all businesses in the state” (14 Fascinating Oklahoma Small Business Statistics (2022), 2022). If only 5% of small businesses decided to contribute to their community to help the homeless, that number would be 17,932. If each donated only \$10 to a local non-profit serving the homeless, that amount would be \$179,323!

However, businesses don't need to contribute financially to make a difference, they could help in many other ways. The possibilities are only limited by the bounds of the business' creativity. Here are just a few examples:

- Construction companies could offer discounts to non-profits seeking to build housing for the homeless.
- Carpenters could construct mini houses that could be funded through donations or crowdfunding to house the homeless.
- Trailer manufacturers could collaborate with other companies to create mobile housing trailers that could serve as temporary, emergency shelter.
- A retail store may donate some clearance items to a local clothing ministry.
- A personal development coach could give free training (video, live, or in written form) and offer discounted one-to-one coaching services to the homeless and low-income families in their community.
- Self-help book authors can donate copies of their book to local shelters for residents to read, or do book readings at the shelter for those who may be illiterate or have learning disabilities.
- Financial experts can offer free classes on the basics of budgeting and saving money.
- Rental property owners could offer one or more select units at a discounted rate as temporary or long-term housing options.
- Counselors could offer free classes on managing depression and anxiety, and on how to connect with others emotionally.

- Motels could offer one or more rooms at a discounted rate as temporary housing for the homeless.
- Entrepreneurs or transportation companies could come up with lower-cost transportation options that could connect cities across Oklahoma and/or provide alternatives to walking or cycling within cities and small towns – *this would not only help the homeless, but it would also help people who are struggling to pay the rising gas prices to get to work and where they need to go.*
- Printing companies can print flyers that promote events to help the homeless for free or at a discount.

Products and services offered by local businesses could be paid for by other businesses, non-profits, churches, cities, or individuals looking to sponsor homeless individuals participating in recovery programs. Projects could be crowdfunded or paid for through grants.

There are countless ways that businesses can help the homeless and all Oklahomans. Not only are businesses crucial to our economy, but they are also the engine that keeps Oklahoma moving. They provide jobs which in turn enables people to provide for themselves and their families so they can buy food, shelter, and their other needs.

Businesses that give back deserve to be supported. This could very well provide a great incentive for people to shop locally to build up Oklahoma's economy, create more jobs, and have a positive impact everywhere.

The Oklahoma Homeless Resources Business Network is intended to serve as the foundation for this aspect of the movement. The member seal is shown to the right. Businesses join for free and contribute in whatever ways they want and are able. For more information and to sign up, go to <https://okhomeless.com/businesses/>.



Non-Profit Organizations and Ministries

Non-profit organizations and ministries are the ones that run the shelters, soup kitchens, food pantries, and more. Without them, many homeless people would go hungry and have nowhere to go.

Dependent on donations and volunteers, non-profit organizations and ministries have a lot of limitations and challenges they must work within. The need is often far greater than they can serve. Shelters may run out of beds, food pantries may not have enough food to distribute, and others may lack the funding or resources to serve all who come to them for help.

With greater community support and collaboration, non-profit organizations and ministries serving the homeless will be able to grow and expand their programs. There are a variety of actions that non-profit organizations can take to get more support.

Here are some of the things that non-profit organizations and ministries can do:

- Create more online and offline awareness of issues, the work they do, and what they need

- Get to know local business owners and people in the community
- Invite businesses, churches, and the public to sponsor specific individuals or families for a particular need
- Publish the stories of individuals and families that have been helped using the donations and sponsorships received
- Build an email list and send out a monthly newsletter explaining how donations helped with a specific project
- Help the homeless connect with those who can provide ongoing emotional support and/or friendship in the community that can serve as a positive influence
- Host events in collaboration with other non-profits, or with churches, businesses, or others in the community to help the homeless with a particular need

As the non-profit organizations and ministries are empowered through greater support, they can expand their programs and work together with other community efforts to steer the homeless towards self-sufficiency. Non-profits will experience many benefits as a result, such as:

- Greater access to resources across the state through statewide collaboration
- More donations and volunteers that result from greater awareness of their program and needs
- Less dependence on their assistance as people are transformed into contributors

Churches

Churches are important as they can provide much needed social and emotional support for homeless individuals and the community. Even if a church does not have the financial means to provide material assistance or support, they can fulfill other needs the homeless and community has.

Here are some ways churches could potentially participate:

- Holding special church services at an alternate time in a public location for those who might feel uncomfortable attending church directly, or that may lack a way to get there
- Host special events with free food and an educational or entertaining activity such as a concert, movie, or free class (cooking, life skills, budgeting, etc.)
- Provide the homeless with much needed friendship by listening to them, showing genuine interest in what they have to say, and keeping regular contact with them
- Host workshops, speakers, or classes that address important life skills people lack (ie. cooking, financial classes, etc.)
- Sponsoring homeless individuals that are participating in recovery programs
- Going out to meet the homeless where they are, talking with them, and giving them some food, clothing, blankets, and/or other items
- Donating items to non-profits that serve the homeless like food, clothing, or other essentials
- Volunteering to cook and serve meals at local soup kitchens
- Starting a local group to knit or crochet hats and/or scarves for the homeless
- Host donation programs where the community is encouraged to donate certain items that can then be sent to where those items are needed

- Do Bible studies with the homeless and those in the jails (many homeless have spent time in jail or prison) – *it can impact them, their families, and the people around them while helping to deter bad behaviors*
- Pray with people and for people, or perhaps start a prayer group
- Provide transportation or help distribute items to the homeless and those in need
- Work with non-profit organizations and churches to donate or help them acquire needed resources
- Praying for the community as well as all the homeless and struggling families across the state

Churches can benefit in a variety of ways:

- Growing their church size by bringing new members into their church family
- Earning respect from the homeless and the community by being a living, walking, and talking version of the Bible
- Inspiring their members to be more engaged and active within the community
- Becoming closer to God by serving the needs of the community both physically and spiritually

Churches have a tremendous opportunity to become beacons of hope and inspiration for thousands if they will seize the opportunity and allow God to work through them. All will reap the rewards of the work they sow in the ground for churches have the power to uplift, heal, and encourage the lost and broken people who are in dire need of God.

Individuals

Many individuals care about the homeless in the community but are unsure how to help them. Some people will give them cash directly, others may give out food or other items. While such assistance can be somewhat helpful to the homeless to meet some immediate need, the unfortunate thing is that cash may be used to purchase drugs, alcohol, or other nonessential items.

Such donations alone are simply not enough to provide help in the long-term, so the homeless are not incentivized to try to use it that way, and instead will use it towards something that helps them with some immediate desire or craving.

Some people who have tried to help a homeless individual or couple have met with disaster. Such tragic stories have been told by the news and police of good-hearted people taking the homeless into their cars and homes, only to end up being attacked or killed. Unfortunately, not all homeless have good character. Some have spent time in jail, with some having committed serious crimes. Some will steal from local businesses and homes, sleep or loiter on personal and commercial property, leave behind trash or drug paraphernalia, and/or cause property damage.

Individuals who want to help the homeless should be encouraged to do so in more productive and safer ways by working alongside the community through the non-profits, churches, ministries, and local efforts to address it. Because there is safety in numbers, it will better ensure that no one is harmed or killed while helping the homeless.

Efforts need to be made to educate the public, with the help of law enforcement and experienced professionals. With expert guidance, individuals can learn the best ways to handle encounters with the homeless. While this may result in a decline in personal assistance being offered and given to the homeless – it also means that more organized efforts will be supported and encouraged that will be better suited and able to steer the homeless towards a long-term solution and program that will get them off the street for good.

With proper guidance and instruction, individuals will be encouraged to help in the following ways:

- Providing assistance referrals
- Collaborating with the network to connect homeless to resources they need out of their region
- Arranging transportation for the homeless to reach shelters
- Putting together and distributing seasonal packs of items for the homeless
- Connecting with local businesses
- Spreading awareness online and offline
- Volunteering with local non-profits and ministries
- Supporting local businesses that help the homeless

The Oklahoma Homeless Resources Team (OHRT) was created to help with this. Individuals simply join and contribute in whatever ways they are most willing and able to do. They will be encouraged to refer the homeless to local resources, using the homeless directory as a guide, and work with their local charities that can serve the homeless. In this way, they are kept safe and help the homeless in a more meaningful way, not just helping their immediate needs, but their more long-term needs.

Cities

Cities play a huge role in helping the homeless, as they may establish or fund various resources, shelters, or assistance programs. Some cities already do a lot while some don't even know they may have a homeless problem. Cities will typically try to create a solution but only when the issue is big enough that it can't be ignored.

A handful of homeless people in a small town is unlikely to warrant any kind of citywide response, whereas dozens of homeless people would. The only difference in this is the number of people. In either case, people need help, but for much of Oklahoma that help does not exist. This is very apparent in rural parts of Oklahoma, or anywhere outside of the Oklahoma City and Tulsa area. Even in the big cities, despite the resources available, you'll still see homeless on the streets.

The homeless can be a significant financial burden on cities. They can create messes that the city then must pay workers to clean up, it can increase crime in areas, reduce tax revenue when businesses are impacted by the presence of the homeless on their property, the law enforcement gets called to respond to calls of the homeless breaking into or loitering on private property, and more.

Cities are expected to build shelters and provide services to the homeless but doing so requires a lot of taxpayer funding. Residents may be forced to pay higher taxes as a result or be frustrated as they may want the money to be put towards public infrastructure or services such as parks, roads, education, or

buses. The location of shelters is also problematic, as most people do not want a shelter built near their homes or near schools. Their primary concern is one of safety and fears of increased crime.

Crime often can escalate when you gather the homeless into a particular area. The homeless may get into fights, sell and/or abuse drugs, or engage illegal activities. Many homeless have a criminal record, with a significant number having committed a sexual offense in the past. The concerns of residents are justified when these things are considered.

Fortunately, homeless shelters are not the only way to house the homeless. There are alternative solutions that could be used or established that – with the cooperation of local businesses, non-profit organizations, and existing recovery programs – could be quite successful in addressing the issue more cheaply and immediately that also considers their long-term needs.

For example, instead of building a shelter, cities could make deals with local motels, property owners, and rental management companies to provide temporary and long-term housing for homeless individuals. Another possibility is collaborating with other cities to transport homeless individuals to locations where they can participate in a long-term recovery program. For many rural Oklahoma communities that lack any place to house the homeless, transporting them to locations with established programs is likely their only option.

By building upon and expanding what already exists, cities can help the homeless more effectively and efficiently, while also reducing the cost. Of course, cities will need to work with mental health professionals, social workers, non-profit organizations, local businesses, and state agencies to create a strategy that works best for them, according to their needs. Some cities are already actively trying to do this, such as Oklahoma City and Norman.

What often presents the greatest challenge for cities is creating affordable housing. Due to various city, state, and/or federal requirements, it is typically not profitable to construct affordable housing. According to Forbes, “Low-income housing contains a high risk of cash flow, property upkeep, materials, maintenance, security and taxes, just to name a few, which make a cap rate of 6% just not acceptable” (Rudman, 2021). The author continues and gives greater insight into the issues and solutions for affordable housing:

“Affordable housing is one of the most important sectors in America. According to research conducted by the Census Bureau in 2019, more than 25% of households in America are low-income (making less than \$35,000 a year). 1 in 4 households in America live in affordable housing and the lower tier of income live in very bad conditions. Affordable housing is important for the growth of our society and can create a stable base for adults and children to have a better future. However, if mismanaged and neglected, the crime rates could increase, profitability will decrease and tenants, as well as management, will be displeased. In order to achieve the right balance of business goals and community improvement, the investors, as well as developers, must take into account all factors including the base cost of said properties. This balance will be achieved by listening to the community first and then building a renting process around it. The target rent should reflect the

max ROI and instead should be focused on long-term renters. The application process should be structured in a sensitive way, understanding that the market is not a regular renting market. The most important thing is to remember that affordable housing, when done right, can actually change people's lives and allows people to be proud of their homes." (Rudman, 2021)

An article by Jenny Schuetz on the Brookings Institution website explains the biggest reasons “why building more public housing is not a cure-all for the nation’s housing woes” (Schuetz, 2022). She says the primary main obstacles are land availability and local zoning laws. “Building subsidized housing—or for that matter, market rate rental housing—is illegal in most parts of the U.S. Local zoning laws prohibit structures other than single-family detached homes on the majority of land across cities and suburbs.”

She continues, “despite those calls for ‘the government’ to build more housing, most housing authorities don’t have the capacity or the desire to undertake new construction projects.” Furthermore, new properties mean they will be responsible for maintaining those properties. Many properties are already deteriorating, Schuetz explains, “most existing public housing properties have been slowly deteriorating for decades...why would housing authorities sign up to build more apartments when they already face enormous maintenance backlogs and insufficient capital funds?” (Schuetz, 2022).

In the recent report by Stossel, he shows how many public housing projects are destroyed by the tenants to the point where they must be demolished (Stossel, 2022). Perhaps tenants would take much better care for their property if they had ownership of it, where rent payments were put towards owning the property rather than simply renting it.

With all of this in mind, cities need to consider what they can do to better facilitate the construction of new affordable housing properties, acquisition of existing properties, and the maintenance of them all to strike the right balance. However, providing shelter is not the only way cities can help the homeless and their residents.

One of the biggest challenges for the homeless and low-income families is transportation. With the rising cost of gas and the lack of widespread public transportation, especially in rural areas, it can be extremely hard to get where we need to go.

Cities could either fund or incentivize private companies to establish affordable public transportation options within their city and connecting to nearby cities. Buses or vans are not the only types of transportation – electric scooters and e-bikes can also be helpful for people to get back and forth to work or where they need to go. Private companies could offer shared riding services that follow routes like that of public transportation systems.

The city could offer support by issuing credits for the homeless to use to access private transportation options, while also helping to create more job opportunities.

There are other ways cities could help as well, such as:

- Reduce burdensome regulations, permits, and other red tape that will bog down efforts to help the homeless and low-income families

- Working with non-profit organizations and ministries to help them get the resources, funding, and expertise they need for their programs to better accommodate the needs of the homeless
- Bringing in mental health experts and law enforcement to lend guidance and support to non-profits and ministries working with the homeless
- Collaborating with cities across Oklahoma to exchange resources or transport homeless individuals participating in recovery programs
- Provide facilities for businesses and non-profits to offer free training and classes that can help the homeless and low-income families build life skills
- Hold citywide events to help fundraise for local non-profit organizations
- Offer tax incentives to businesses and individuals to support local non-profit organizations serving the homeless
- Create a rent/utility assistance program to help prevent people and families from becoming homeless

Small cities and towns may not have the budget or means to do much to help the homeless in their area. In those cases, they might want to collaborate with other towns or cities for assistance.

Here is one example of one scenario that demonstrates how such collaboration might work using fictional locations – small town “East Shallster” and medium-sized city “Whitete Harbour”:

1. East Shallster donates or contributes in some other way to recovery program in the nearby city Whitete Harbour.
2. When a homeless individual is found, they are housed temporarily in a motel then transported to the recovery program in Whitete Harbour.
3. After the individual completes required stage(s) of recovery, Whitete Harbour then arranges the transportation to bring the individual back to East Shallster and they are placed into pre-arranged long-term housing and a job with a local business.
4. The recovered homeless individual is put in contact with support groups through a local church and assigned a case worker through the state or a non-profit organization that will provide guidance, encouragement, training, and mental health support – thus helping the individual to become self-sufficient and a positive contributor in East Shallster.

Many homeless can recover and become positive contributors to society. These are the people that cities should want. For a city to thrive, it needs residents as that is where cities will get their tax revenue. Cities rely on the businesses to make sales and the residents to be making money so they can purchase goods and pay the sales tax on what they buy. Cities could potentially establish an environment that incentivizes more businesses and people to come there, it can create more opportunities and prosperity for all.

Of course, not all homeless are ready or willing to make the changes necessary to get off the streets. But that does not mean they should be allowed to remain homeless.

Cities need to work with local mental health professionals, law enforcement, drug rehab centers, non-profit organizations, churches, and ministries to put together the proper strategy to reach through to them.

Some homeless are mistrustful of others, especially any kind of authority, so time may be required to earn their trust and help them effectively. In the meantime, perhaps providing them with a proper camping spot and some camping equipment might serve as an alternative to them sleeping on the streets or forming homeless camps.

Conclusion

To effectively address the homelessness crisis, a lot of people need to be working together towards a common goal. Such a level of cooperation and collaboration is dependent on the willingness of those who participate, and there is no question that there are definite challenges to such an enormous effort. Therefore, it is something that must be voluntary and rewarding, benefiting all who get involved as well as the local communities.

Each person can play a part, whether it's as part of a non-profit, business, or church, or even as an individual. This is what makes it so powerful. Everyone has at least one talent or skill that could be used for helping others. Most everyone has at least one item they no longer need. Even those who give a simple smile and acknowledgement to a homeless person can help them feel like a human again. An old blanket or coat could prevent someone from freezing to death. Your old shoes might help a homeless person that only has flip-flops. Small actions when made in great numbers are powerful.

The greatest and most amazing things are done when everyone works together. If the Amish can move a barn with just their hands working together, imagine what the entire state of Oklahoma could do with even just a little effort.

Furthermore, giving to others can yield great rewards that we may not recognize nor consider – from new friendships and connections to opportunities we might never have otherwise. It helps to give our lives purpose and value, while providing others a second chance at life.

Oklahoma is filled with incredible people that can make the effort a success and demonstrate to the entire nation and the world what we can really do.

About The Author

This document was written by Melissa (Lisa) Li, the owner of Making The Impact LLC and founder of Oklahoma Homeless Resources.

Li is a web developer and graphic designer that is currently attending both Southeastern Oklahoma State University and University of Oklahoma to earn her bachelor's degree in Computer Science. She is expected to graduate in 2023 or 2024 (it depends on the availability of the required classes).

Years ago, Li had spent several months homeless in a rural part of southeastern Oklahoma. She owes her life to the non-profit organization, Families Feeding Families, located in Durant who kept her from freezing to death with their generous donation of blankets, and they kept her fed with their hot meals and donations of food.

During that time, she met and spoke with other homeless people in the area. One was an elderly woman living in her car. Her car was packed full of her belongings, and she explained she had no where to go. She had a home, but she was forced out of it. Another was an older man who was camping primitively somewhere in the outskirts of town. In a brief encounter, she met a couple that snuck aboard a train and came to the area looking for assistance.

These were just a few of the homeless she met in those days that the current system and resources failed to help. While Li was able to overcome homelessness, many others had not but there was no or little help for them.

Years later and in different parts of Oklahoma, Li encountered more homeless people. One time she found an elderly woman sitting outside of a gas station. The woman refused to go to a shelter that was in another town about 30 minutes away and choose to sleep outside of a motel.

In another encounter, while working in a restaurant, Li encountered a homeless man wearing flipflops that sat down to eat. She paid for his meal and searched desperately for a shelter or program that he could go to, and some form of transportation for him. Much to her surprise, there was none that she could find. While there was an emergency shelter, he had already been there before and could not go back. Since it was too dangerous for her to take him herself and she had no idea where he could even go, she couldn't help him further.

Frustrated with the lack of resources for the homeless and the great difficulty in finding assistance for them, she began seeking out ways that homelessness could be addressed more effectively and efficiently. Not knowing where or what resources were available was the first problem. This is what led to the creation of the Oklahoma Homeless Resources website and project.

Li's hope is that all people will realize their God-given talents and use them to bless the world. Not only to help others but for the betterment of all.

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