

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT CATHOLIC CHARITIES HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

INTRODUCTION:

Homelessness has become one of the biggest, most talked about, most argued about issues of our community in the past four years. The overwhelming majority of the region identifies homelessness as the top issue in local politics, news cycles, and community conversations. We all care about the issue of homelessness, and we care about the people who struggle with that circumstance.

In this public discourse, almost all the focus is actually only on the smallest segment of people experiencing homelessness. *People visibly in homelessness*. The people we see on the streets, camped under railroad bridges, in alleys. The people we see when we drive to work or go to dinner and a movie downtown. The people we saw at Camp Hope for over a year. These are the *people visibly in homelessness*. For better or for worse, this is the group of people we are really talking about, worrying about, arguing about.

Most of us will actually never see or encounter the overwhelming majority of the people who experience homelessness locally.

There are likely over 7,000 people experiencing homelessness in our region. They are individuals and families who are doubled or tripled up in a multi-generational house or an apartment. They are couch surfing, bouncing between friends and families, a few months here, a few months there. They are living in old RV's or campers on cinder blocks behind a friend's house. They are living in their cars or vans.

This group of somewhat invisible folks is by far the biggest group of those experiencing homelessness. One school district in our region reported well over 3,000 students who had experienced this kind of homelessness recently. And that's only one school district. Every school district, every neighborhood, every town, every part of our region has members of this homeless group. However, this group does not present a direct threat to retail, quality of life, businesses, commercial real estate, or downtown business profits. This group does not represent a threat to elected officials or their campaigns. This group does not meet the threshold for being newsworthy enough, controversial enough, divisive enough, or sensational enough for local media or social media and as a result this group hardly exists for most in our region. But it is a very real group, living a chaotic existence marked by suffering and distress.

These are not the people that receive all the attention. For all intents and purposes, the people we are talking about most of the time when we discuss this issue are the ***people visibly in homelessness***.

However, within the group of the visible homeless, which is itself a very small fraction of all people experiencing homelessness, is yet another *even smaller* group. *This is the tiny subset that really gets the greatest amount of attention and perhaps the focal point of the community's fear, anger, and concern*. This is the group that sometimes chooses to engage in dangerous, criminal activities. This small portion of the visible homeless population is the group that seems to concern us the most; this small group of maybe a few dozen people is the group that flashes into all of our minds when we think about and talk about the entire "homeless population" in our region.

In truth, what we are most often talking about and concerned about is actually a very small fraction of a very small subset of the overall homeless population. That reality is one of the most essential and most troubling elements of this entire conversation. We need to care about and intentionally address the other, much larger, invisible group of homeless because these are the children, teens, adults, and families that will continue to enter the visible street homeless population if we don't focus on them too. We also need to care about and intentionally address the otherwise compliant and well-behaved majority of the *visible* street homeless population.

Finally, for this smallest group—that visible street homeless group who also choose to continue to be a danger to themselves or to others, and who continue to sometimes engage in overt criminal activity—we need to support law enforcement interventions, corrective and restorative justice interventions, and most importantly, behavioral health treatment interventions.

FACTS ABOUT CATHOLIC CHARITIES & THOSE WE SERVE:

- ***Catholic Charities serves more than 55,000 people each year*** in 15 different programs at 102 locations in 13 counties across Eastern Washington. The overwhelming majority of our clients are served through maternity support programs, senior services, counseling, emergency assistance (rent, utilities, gas, food), childcare centers, food security programs, immigration legal services, disaster relief, and the Christmas Bureau.
- 97.8% of the people we serve are individuals, families, children, seniors, people with disabling conditions, veterans, farm workers, immigrants, and other people suffering the general day to day effects of inter-generational poverty. Only 2.2% of all the clients we serve are actually in homelessness when they engage in our services.
- ***Catholic Charities owns and operates over 3,000 units of housing.*** Most of those units are basic affordable housing for families, the working poor, people with disabilities, seniors, and veterans. 5,145 men, women, and children will put their heads on Catholic Charities pillows tonight. Of our 67 apartment communities, 6 serve single adults who have exited from homelessness – that is only 310 units out of 3,000+ total units. These supportive housing communities have mental health & substance use disorder counseling on site, as well as security staff, life skills training staff, case management staff, property management staff, maintenance staff, healthcare coordinator staff, and other staff whose job is to help single adults coming out of homelessness to find safety, sobriety, employment, and an overall more stable life.
- Our Homelessness Service programs are highly effective. **In 2022, we exited 771 people from homelessness, and we diverted 2,873 people from ever entering into homelessness in the first place.**
- In Eastern Washington, close to 23% of the population lives at or below the federal poverty line, meaning they are often one broken down car, one unexpected medical bill, one lost shift at work, one surprise rent increase, or one family financial emergency away from becoming homeless themselves. In just the past five years, rents in the greater Spokane region for low income individuals and families have gone up nearly 50%, and have in some cases doubled. That reality, coupled with the fact that there is a massive housing shortage of close to 10,000 units needed in our region, has placed a large segment of the population at risk to lose their housing stability at any moment or be priced out of housing completely.
- Spokane's homeless system is helping more people than ever before, and homelessness is still rising. The increase in people experiencing homelessness is directly caused by rising housing costs. In 2018, a

household needed an annual income of \$26,000 to afford a one-bedroom apartment. In 2022, that same household would need to have an annual income of \$37,000, a 42% increase over four years. Homelessness has increased 52% during that same period of time. There is a massive shortage of housing inventory. The working poor and low-wage members of our community simply cannot find landlords who will rent to them or housing they can afford. There has been a massive increase in untreated and undertreated mental health illnesses in recent years. There has also been a massive increase in addiction and crime that comes with the recent fentanyl explosion in our midst. All of these realities factor into the increase in homelessness we have seen, especially the increase in those visibly experiencing homelessness. Every single one of these problems is solvable if our community and our elected officials have the conviction to do it.

FACTS ABOUT CATHOLIC CHARITIES' HOMELESSNESS PROGRAMS:

- Catholic Charities operates five emergency shelter environments, designed to serve five different populations. All five have zero tolerance for possession or use of drugs/alcohol on site. Two of the five shelter environments carry specific emphasis on recovery, and one of the five requires people staying in the shelter to be actively engaged in recovery and sober living. We operate several different shelter models very intentionally—because every person's circumstances are different and because ***choice is a key component of human dignity***. The overwhelming majority of shelter clients have respected our rules and behaved appropriately in our shelters for more than 50 years.
- Catholic Charities owns and operates five “Haven” properties in downtown Spokane for people who have exited from homelessness and want stable, supportive housing with comprehensive services onsite. These properties seem to get the most attention of any of our 67 properties because, often, that smallest group of homeless persons who refuse our help and who are engaging in dangerous or criminal activities congregate in front of these properties trying to gain entry or prey on our residents. All of our downtown single adult Haven properties have 50 units each and all are within a block or two from the House of Charity. Each Haven has mental health & substance use disorder counseling on site, as well as security staff, life skills training staff, case management staff, property management staff, maintenance staff, healthcare coordinator staff and other staff and volunteers whose job is to help single adults coming out of homelessness to find safety, sobriety, and employment, and begin an overall more stable life. Each Haven property has comprehensive house rules and expectations surrounding behavior, crime, drugs, and any activity that presents a risk to the community. All residents agree to follow these rules when they sign their lease and move in. If they break these rules, they immediately become at risk of being evicted.
- ***Our shelters and our housing work—and people who move into our housing make great strides toward healthier, more stable lives:***
 - In our downtown Haven properties, 93% of residents maintain their housing for two years or longer.
 - 86% of residents engage in on-site services provided by our staff.
 - After one year of housing, our residents show a 33% drop in vulnerability measures. This translates to better health, higher levels of self-sufficiency, lower reliance on emergency public services, and increases in income.
 - After one year of housing, our residents increase their income by over \$700 per month on average.

- Our Havens use *Housing First* principles, which we are required to follow by federal, state, and local funders—including the City of Spokane. Housing First is an approach that prioritizes housing for people experiencing homelessness, where safe housing becomes a platform where basic needs are met, and from which people can access the services and supports they need to pursue goals and move toward healthier lives. Until a chronic street homeless individual or family is stably housed and knows where their next meal is coming from, where they will sleep each night, and where they can go to a safe “home”, it is very difficult for them to focus on the work of addressing the challenges in their lives that might have caused them to become homeless. This all begs the question of why some groups continue to say that “housing first is a failure,” citing “studies” that show that homelessness has increased in the U.S. since the Housing First program was started nationally. Homelessness has increased in our country in the past 20 years. There is no doubt about that. However, *that increase is not due to the fact that more housing for the homeless has been built*. That is simply illogical and inaccurate. Homelessness has increased nationally due to many documented, common-sense realities including increased costs of housing, housing inventory shortages, unemployment and under-employment, lack of living wages, economic events such as recessions and inflation, increases in untreated substance use disorders nationally (cocaine, meth, opioid, and fentanyl crises in the past decades), and the COVID pandemic.
- Nobody WANTS to be living on the street. Sadly, elevating the idea that some people *want* to be in homelessness has become a convenient way to avoid the responsibility the community has to care for people with serious medical illnesses. The overwhelming majority of people experiencing homelessness in the Spokane region want to change their circumstances. They want access to quality medical care, and they want to be on a path to stable, permanent housing. There is a small percentage of that population who choose to refuse shelter or housing options and unfortunately engage in inappropriate and sometimes criminal activity that harms themselves and others. This group is an extremely small subset of the overall population experiencing homelessness; however, they are often highly visible, highly mobile, highly active, and highly problematic throughout downtown Spokane. Not surprisingly, the entire population of people experiencing homelessness is often unfairly painted by and identified with this very small group of very ill and very troubled people.
- It is this small group that can often be seen loitering on the street in front of or near our Haven Properties because this group is often trying to sneak into these properties, where they can target our vulnerable residents who are trying to stabilize their lives. We engage with this group of 40-60 individuals on a daily basis. We invite them to come inside the House of Charity and get a meal, a bed, a shower, and other services. We invite them to allow us to help them get the behavioral health services that could help them. We invite them to work with us to let us get them into emergency housing and permanent supportive housing. Unfortunately, they refuse and often continue to camp and loiter in the vicinity. Unfortunately, they also often engage in unsafe and criminal activity that harms themselves and others, especially our House of Charity clients and staff as well as our Haven residents and staff. For this group, or for any person (homeless or otherwise) who engages in unsafe and criminal activity, we believe that there should be an immediate engagement from law enforcement and the criminal justice system.
- Unfortunately, our local law enforcement, ***which we believe does a very good job for our community***, is under resourced. Due to changes in state and local laws as well as lack of behavioral health inpatient beds and other appropriate beds for community safety, the criminal justice system is often unable to arrest or detain many of the very troubled persons who linger around our properties or in the downtown core and engage in criminal activity that threatens our clients, our staff, our residents, and the entire Spokane community.

- Catholic Charities invests over \$1 million per year on safety and security in and around our facilities, including safety/security personnel, access control, and surveillance camera systems. We have asked law enforcement and local government for assistance repeatedly over the past two years. However, a very small number of bad actors with unfortunate criminal intentions have continued to present significant challenges to the community at large and to our work to feed the hungry, heal the hurting, and welcome the stranger.
- We often hear the concern that our work serving the poor “attracts more homeless to Spokane.” Federally mandated Point in Time data as well as our own internal data tracking indicate clearly that over 80% of the chronic street homeless single adults in our region were born and raised within 75 miles of downtown Spokane. These are members of our community. For many years, the continual myths and stories of other cities like Portland and Seattle “busing their homeless to Spokane because we have more services” has been proven false time and time again. The idea that we have too many services for the homeless in Spokane, and that these services attract people from out of state, is not supported by data or our day to day knowledge of this population. More importantly, from the moral, ethical, and religious framework we embrace from Catholic Social Teaching, we consider it important to share that we believe that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God, and as such deserves dignity, respect, and compassion. For Catholic Charities, it does not matter if you are from Spokane, or Syracuse or Syria, if you are hungry, we are going to feed you. If you are hurting, we are going to help you heal. If you are homeless, we are going to try to offer you a bed.
- We often hear the concern that “you are enabling people who are still drinking or using drugs.” Again, all our shelters have zero tolerance for drug or alcohol use or possession on site. We feel strongly that people struggling with active addiction absolutely deserve the dignity of a bed, a meal, a shower, and a path to treatment—even if they are not ready for it. When a person moves into one of our Haven properties, we expect that they will engage in services (mental health and substance use disorder) and begin to reduce their self-harm. If they engage in behavior that presents a danger to themselves and others, their continued housing becomes at risk.
- We enable human dignity first and foremost. We believe that no human being, regardless of any self-identity markers, factors, or conditions they may present with, should ever have to eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom outdoors in the richest country in the history of the world.

HOUSE OF CHARITY 2.0

- There has been a great deal of discussion about relocating the House of Charity to well outside the downtown core—a project called House of Charity 2.0. Here are the facts on the project:
 - In the spring of 2022, the City of Spokane encouraged Catholic Charities to begin working on a plan to potentially relocate the House of Charity out of the current downtown location. Our underlying principle in taking on the project was, and remains, an effort to continuously improve the quality and effectiveness of services for people in the community who need to access shelter services.
 - Last year Catholic Charities signed a Letter of Interest with the City of Spokane that included our intention to find a new location and to design, build, and operate a new shelter.

- Since the spring of 2022, CCEW has identified three different sites well outside of the downtown core and has spent over \$50,000 on costs such as Phase I environmental work on the sites, architectural design for a new facility, and contractor pricing.
- All three sites identified by Catholic Charities were shovel ready, zoned correctly, and viable for the project. Two of those sites were rejected outright by the mayor. The third site was determined to be too close to the end of the Spokane Airport runway to be an appropriate location to provide adequate care and human dignity.
- In the past year, Catholic Charities has on multiple occasions requested that the city: (a) provide a listing of all city owned property so that Catholic Charities could investigate more sites; (b) provide basic information about where the funding for construction and operation of a new shelter was going to come from within the city; and (c) to reimburse Catholic Charities for the \$50,000+ that has already been spent on securing sites and designing the facility. To date, Catholic Charities has not received substantive action on any of those requests from the mayor or her leadership team. As a result, there has been no movement whatsoever on relocating the House of Charity.

SOLUTIONS FOR A HEALTHY EASTERN WASHINGTON

Homelessness is a solvable problem. The idea that “this can’t be solved...it’s too big of a problem and there’s no way to fix it” is simply not true. We can drop a Mars rover on a dime 60 million miles away and we can read the entire library of Congress on our cell phones...of course we can solve homelessness in this country and in this community.

To solve this problem, as a community:

1. **We need more units of housing.** We need to either build more housing or repurpose more buildings and hotels into housing for people coming out of homelessness. It is difficult, if not impossible, to help people stabilize from behavioral health issues until they have a roof over their heads, a front door, and a safe place to live. We need to build homes and apartments for all levels of the community. We need more workforce and affordable housing, not just for the homeless and for the poorest of the poor, but for the working poor, young families, first-time renters, and every stratum of our community. There is not enough housing for the homeless or for the lowest-income members of our community because there is also not enough housing for the working poor, the middle class, for young people just starting out in life, for seniors, for everyone. There is too much stress on the housing market because of a profound lack of inventory overall. This makes affordable housing impossible to find. Exploding home and rental prices makes the problem even worse and forces more people at the lower ends of the economy into housing instability, doubling and tripling up, couch surfing, and becoming part of the visible street homeless.
2. **We need more inpatient residential behavioral health treatment beds.** The untreated and undertreated diseases surrounding mental health and addiction have reached a crisis level. When mental health struggles are not treated early on, fragile people become more unstable as they age. Then it is often not long before those fragile people begin to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. That path, especially when it leads to substance abuse, almost always ends up in unemployment, food insecurity, the loss of custody of children, the loss of support systems, the breaking of families, and ultimately homelessness. We need more facilities where vulnerable people can receive treatment for these behavioral health issues in a residential setting. Mental health and addiction treatment beds are

almost non-existent in our community. With more beds in this area, we can help people get well, get stable and get on a path to housing and employment.

3. **We would be interested in moving the House of Charity out of the downtown core.** When we built it 24 years ago it was in a forgotten, abandoned part of downtown which has now been turned into the University District. We have wanted to relocate the House of Charity. We have tried for 18 months to do this. A more trauma-informed, less congregate, “dorm like” setting is needed that allows for more personalized spaces, more treatment beds, more medical respite beds, and more homeless hospice beds. A relocated House of Charity will need continual bus service so clients can continue to access services in other parts of the region. We have had a Letter of Interest in place with the city for 18 months to move the House of Charity out of downtown. Catholic Charities has spent a great deal of time and money to design a new facility and plan for this move. We have identified multiple sites that were zoned correctly and appropriately located. We have asked the city to respond to us with basic requests to move this project forward. Unfortunately, there has not been any genuine or meaningful movement from the city’s leadership to proceed with this proposed relocation, but we are still prayerfully hopeful.
4. **We need to encourage all of our elected officials and all of our local governments to make data-driven, outcomes-based, trauma-informed decisions about how to spend tax dollars in our community.** The combined budgets of the City of Spokane, Spokane County, Airway Heights, Liberty Lake, and the City of Spokane Valley are well over \$3 billion per year. Homelessness is a regional problem that requires a regional solution, such as a Regional Authority, that makes collaborative decisions to mobilize the resources needed to address this problem. Decisions about how to spend federal and state homelessness dollars locally is only one part of this essential decision-making process. Our local governments also need to look at zoning laws, land use, combatting the “not in my backyard” ideologies, and other issues that affect the community’s ability to locate essential services and housing that help people exit from, and avoid, homelessness. We also need to find more reasonable and effective ways to address criminal challenges. This will take elected leaders, law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and the community working together to find better paths forward.
5. **We need to stop criminalizing and vilifying the poor and people experiencing homelessness.** It has become a divisive issue in our community, and although the overwhelming majority of our community are kind, generous, compassionate people, we cannot fall victim to the small percentage of the community that wants to use fear, anger, and hate to drive our perceptions and actions when it comes to addressing homelessness. **We need to prioritize both human dignity and accountability for all segments of our community**, including people who use services, homeless service providers, the business/real estate communities, and other key stakeholders. We can’t listen to the voices that want us to blame people in homelessness themselves. We can’t be seduced by the ideological voices that tell us “it’s their own fault...they haven’t tried hard enough or worked hard enough.” We can’t listen to the voices that want us to be angry at or blame the service providers who dare to feed, shelter, or house the homeless. At the same time, we also can’t listen to the voices that want to tell us that “anything goes” and “this is America - we need to let everyone make whatever choices they want to make and do whatever they want wherever they want” regardless of how it may allow people to become a danger to themselves or others.” The answer is in the compassionate, reasonable middle.