

PANELISTS

- Katie Moore, Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida
- Danielle Landaal, IDignity
- Christine Cleveland, Orange County Public Schools
- Bruce Matthews, Clean the World
- Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

Community Conversation: Homelessness in Central Florida

A moderated discussion about initiatives designed to address homelessness in the region.

Wednesday, November 16th from noon – 1:30pm
Callahan Neighborhood Center, 101 N Parramore
Avenue, Orlando, FL 32801

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

Viewing places that supposedly had something going on well. I worked really extensively with Andrae Bailey here at the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness when that was started. So my background is trying to find things that work and what the best way is to do different things. So to apply that to your question, my opinion is not very popular.

First thing is our system is completely broken. And the reason I say our system is completely broken is it's very difficult for nonprofits to truly, truly work together when you're competing for the same grant dollars.

That's one issue I can talk about. I could go on and on. But within the system that we currently have, which is that's basically what we have to talk about because we can't change the continuum of care nationwide and how help is running all those things that really need to be fixed.

What I found in every city that had success doing anything. The number one thing was a good public relations campaign to start with. That was across the board. In every city that I went to that had major success in any area. It was because the marketing behind that started it all. And so, I think that something that's overlooked by most of the communities. Is how important that is.

The second thing is having a point person on homelessness in your community. Those two things were the two factors that made programs successful all throughout the United States.

Bruce Matthews, Clean the World

For a lot of people, I didn't know when they get SNAP benefits, it's good for food but it's not good for hygiene supplies. So that a lot of times people are going without soap or basic needs. So a lot of things, you know, we take for granted. We get a shower every day, cleaned every day. Homeless don't. You know, that restricts them in a lot of other ways. It's hard to get a job. It's hard to get friends. It's hard to get anything. See your family if you're not, you know, hygienic.

So it all kind of starts there especially, you know, that's me kind of coming from where I'm coming from right now. But there's a lot of things on that level of just basic human needs that the homeless have that are not being met.

Danielle Ladall, IDignity

The challenge I see. I'll stop of course. I work for IDignity. So we assist with identification documents. And that's one of those things. Tom, when you said you went homeless. You had nothing but your ID. Right? And without that ID, you end up being prevented from accessing a lot of things that you need. Right? You can't get into shelters. You can't get into, you know, any sort of proper health care. You can't get employment of course. Right. All those things that are necessary to get you back on your feet.

I was talking to an individual today. And I said, you know, how did you how did you lose your documents? And he said, "Well, I was moving. I moved from California to Florida, lost everything." And now it's, you know, it takes I think for us, it took about six months to get his documents back.

That's a long time. He said, "I wasn't homeless before that." But given enough time without being able to get a job you don't stand a chance. Right?

And so a lot of individuals either find themselves without housing because they lose their identification documents or they've lost or their identification documents and it's preventing them from obtaining housing. Right?

Because it's, A. You can't even get an apartment without an ID. But you also can't get a job to pay for a said apartment. Right? And so for us, that's one of one of the challenges in homelessness is it's super complex, right. There's not one simple challenge that is like if we fix this one thing, everything will be better, right?

But from our perspective, identification is just something that is overlooked because you don't experience the pain unless you've actually been without ID. But it's also just something that's so basic that you don't even really think about it being a need, right? Because you haven't experienced without.

Christine Cleveland, Orange County Public Schools

For education we also count in hotels. We count in shared housing. We also count in inadequate housing. So we have quite a few families who are living in homes with a mortgage. But, their roof was torn off and they can't afford to fix it because maybe there is a gap in insurance or whatever.

Many people who are living in an RV in their home, leasing out garages or sheds, that wouldn't be adequate settings. So, all of those families count. We have almost 7,000 students identified in the district. But coming back to the affordable wage piece, we know that there's got to be thousands more that aren't identified that are in those situations just because. Knowing, I

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think right now in order to get a 2-bedroom apartment it's somewhere around \$28 an hour, that you have to be making. And it's almost like, I think \$52,000. Around \$52,000 a year. People aren't making that. So, I think the challenge that I would say that we see most often is one, just knowledge, knowledge of what your rights are, what's the resources are available, things that are out there.

Even as a person who's worked in handling the same role for five years, every day I learn about a new resource or a new resource. And so imagine being an individual trying to figure out all that right when you need it. But then also that brings in the access piece.

It is so hard. It takes six months to get your documents back. It's they walk into a school and as much as we trying to give them the right of immediate enrollment, which is something they're entitled to. If they don't have those documents, nine times out of ten, those kids get turned away because they don't want to talk about their housing situation. And say, this is what I'm dealing with right now because they don't know their rights. So it's, it's this back and forth access knowledge piece that I constantly see with our families struggling with this.

We hate the word homeless because the moment we say homeless then everybody puts this stigma of a panhandler standing on the street and how could anybody be... They must not have a job. They must not be working. They must not be trying. And the stigma that people have about it. When in reality, 99% of the families we meet do have jobs. They are working. They're trying to get out of their situation you now. So, I think that stigma piece is like this waterfall affected like it impacts their ability to identify to know about what is out there. And then ultimately impacts from public administration. The identification to get the funding for grants from other organizations because the more they serve, this same thing, they get more money, but it doesn't look like there's as many as services.

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

I just want to be able to say one thing while I was thinking about it as you were speaking. One of the things about having a good public awareness education campaign is your number one thing is that you have to get the public's mindset changed. You know, the federal government only gives grant dollars for actual boxes of people, you know, in other words, you have to do this for these people and there's no latitude for communities or service organizations how those dollars get spent. Whereas, if you have a good public awareness campaign and you're raising more public funds, those funds are available to use how the city sees a fit or how that organization sees fit. So that's why, I just want to tie that piece back in.

Question

In what ways do you see that nonprofits work together to maximize the dollars. So it's like... How do you...

Bruce Matthews, Clean the World

I'll just throw out. On our side, we do both. We provide showers for the homeless. But a lot of times where we're going we'll work with other agencies so they have wrap around services. So

we put our shower unit. They also get haircuts or IDs or clothing or food. So that's one of the ways where, you know, a lot of times you are competing, but really you're doing separate things, then it makes sense, you know, when there are groups of homeless that you can bring those groups together and provide more than one service at a time. So that's one of the ways.

Katie Moore, Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida

Like when the shelter that shut down in Econ. They needed to put [them] in places. I put my outreach team out there that Friday morning and processed. The issue was that the homeless, they did not necessarily want to go on that bus to come back to our shelter. They wanted to stick it out there till the end. I'm trying to motivate them. It didn't register with them. But now they're ready to come.

Question from the audience

Having served with the homeless and helped them through the process of getting their ID. And getting social security. I had to walk that walk. Once you get to that point, even if they're to a point where they can afford something. The minute they go to the said landlord and say, yeah, "Where've you lived for the last two months?" Unfortunately homeless. How do you get around that? Because the minute that they say homeless, you're absolutely right, they're done. No discussion. Nothing. No matter how much money, when that word homeless comes out, I think is the only truthful words a person can say when you're asking. Where you lived for the last six months? How do you get around that?

Katie Moore, Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida

I mean, we've partnered with a lot of lessees and landlords to assist with that conversation and that transition. But, a large scale of evicted choose recidivism. I mean, once we get them situated, they're not motivated. So now I feel like they need longer monitoring.

Yes. You can give them that house. Yes. You can give them a place. But now they're just sitting there. We didn't teach them any ADL skills. We didn't teach them any skill building. They don't use all that. So this person is sitting in this empty house doing nothing and now they're back in my shelter two months later. They didn't get anything out of it.

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

So, yes, yes. I have to say that, you know, personally, walking people through this walk, getting them into their house and then watching them fall back into homelessness, Tim and I have had a lot of experience with that. So here's the thing. People don't understand. People get into a survival mode and they're so poor and destitute. I think it's unreasonable to expect them to be honest. I think it's unreasonable to expect them to fit in with society's norms because they are in the middle of a ton of trauma.

And so, one of the things that I do is, I give speeches at a nursing college for the nurses who are working in emergency rooms. Because understanding that people in a survival mode have a completely different mindset. They don't, they can't plan. They literally, psychologically, they cannot plan. It's not something I'm just saying. It's a medical fact. They live day-to-day.

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Moment to moment. So having an understanding trauma informed care and how to reach those people, exactly what she said. We put people all the way to a house, but there is no services after that to help them learn how to be housed. And after living on the streets for 8 or 10 years, you know, you just can't jump back into that life. So we have a lot of service shortfalls because there's all these silos based on grants. That's really what I see.

Danielle Ladall, IDignity

And I would say, though, that our community and, the community organizations that are working with these individuals. I mean, you hit the nail on the head. Where it's not... You can't just throw somebody into a new situation. Call this a win. Right. And so that just, it's the importance of as a community, whether it's the agency, that's doing case management leading up to it. It's the agency doing the case management from housing on. Or it's the community of us around them. Right. Whether it's neighbors or whatever. Building people into community. Because when you feel at home you're going to, you're going to feel safe, all right. You're going to find that's the place you want to be. But if you house somebody and they don't have any choices where they go and you just plop them in an apartment. That's not home. That's not your community. That's not where you feel comfortable, you know? And so, I think it's just really indicative of the importance of that.

And, I do believe our community is looking at the whole situation. We're not just dropping people in and saying, All right! Good job! You know, and yes, these situations can happen. And of course, and there's always recidivism. There's always going to be struggles with that. But that acknowledgment, so we're in a community that is taking a look at how do we circle around these individuals from, you know, day one at the shelter all the way to housing and beyond because that's essential.

Christine Cleveland, Orange County Public Schools

I would just kind of building of on what everyone said. But in the sense, I do think to change the image of what homelessness is, we have to do those the public relations. And we have to show that somebody who meets that definition is not just what people think. And then I think on the second hand of it, that navigation piece. I know we're trying a program in Orange County with a few feeder patterns called Parts. Where we're looking to have our social workers navigate a family that might be in that situation, but really call the agencies for them. And we've tried out some mini trials with some of ours unaccompanied youth this past year. Just looking at going through the matrix and seeing what they need.

I can share one story of a student that he's helped me tell my story everywhere. But he, at age 16, he was in a house with his father and siblings and a tree fell on the house. And, they came and said it was no longer livable. They, the fire department, asked him if they had anywhere to go. Dad said, "Yes, we do." And so he leaves. But then after the fire never leaves, dad tells him that we have a place to go, but there's no room for you. So you're going to need to stay here.

So, at age 16, he just knew that he didn't want to get sent to a group home. And he didn't want to tell anybody. So for two years straight picked up the odd jobs and walked himself

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down to the library every single day. He had enrolled himself into Orange County virtual schools. So it was easy for him to not show up at campus. And he just did his work every day down at the library and pulled out food whenever he could for two straight years. At age 18, you get to that age. And he finally told the assistant principal at the school. And, they called our office.

And, that student graduated last year with a 4.8 GPA and his AA degree. All just from his own perseverance. But, what ended up happening. A lot of you that are students in the room can understand. He didn't understand what the college system was. And how he needed to handle his direct connect to go from Valencia to UCF. So he thought, I can't do anything until I actually graduate and get a full transcript.

He didn't talk to anyone about any of this. He didn't fill out a FASFA until we learned about him in February. And so all of those things that he missed out on caused him to... he got to decline letter from UCF comically. Even with all of that. But it turned out because he filled out the wrong application. He didn't know. And so, all these things had happened to him.

So we're excited because he did get his acceptance. So he'll be a UCF student in the spring, But it's all of those things for them. But he graduated last year. He still calls me. I'm still his quote unquote navigator. When he got his decline letter, he said, "I don't know what to do. Who do I call? How do I do the FAFSA again? How do I do all these things?"

And, I think having a point person that somebody trusts, your case manager starts to be that. But I think I know I've been in some of the training sessions like they're building and building that trust with your case manager. Sometimes there's not the time and the numbers to do that. And how do we start to get navigators that don't have to necessarily be like full out social workers but that person for somebody to talk to and help outreach for them. So I would go.

Question [inaudible]

Danielle Ladall, IDignity

My follow up question to you would be, Is there actually more family families being un-housed? Or is it, Are we doing a better job about identifying?

Christine Cleveland, Orange County Public Schools

So, I think I have I have a mixed answer to that because of my definition for homeless. So, if I'm looking at our literal homeless, it's a very small percentage of our 7,000 students. I will say from that point, most of the families that we learned of come from the shelter, from the coalition or people who identify through that route. We get very few families who just call and say, Hey, I'm losing my car. Can you help me? And we navigate them the other way around.

A lot of that is because families don't want to come to school because they're afraid that somebody is going to come take their kids away. So that's a big piece end for us. On the other

end of it, though, I think there are so many people that are one paycheck away or one family member getting sick away, that are in shared housing or renting.

I can't tell you how many families we got calls from this year. I have to have somebody come move into the bedroom. We now have ten people in a two bedroom because my rent went up five, \$600 dollars. And so, and they can't even leave that place to go to a cheaper place. Because originally they had... You have to make the three times the amount. So even if they went somewhere cheaper and it was slightly less, they're still not going to be able to qualify to get in. And then they'll be out on the street. And so, I feel like we have family after family that is that situation with the kids living in those places. That's why we end up with the hotels that you mentioned. Hotels turned apartments which still qualify for our program. And then they walk in and say, I have a lease and mortgage, but it's a 200 square foot frame. You know, that's not an adequate placement.

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

So the big problem here is we keep throwing out the word homeless. So what does homeless mean? So for you, homeless means a complete different thing than if we really talk about "the homeless." Because. Are we talking chronically homeless? Are we talking transitional homeless? Because her bucket of people is a very small bucket in a huge bucket of reality.

So when she's talking about family homelessness, that's... How that's handled. All the problems that come with it are completely different than, for example, the chronically homeless who have been on the streets for many, many years and require a lot more of it to get stabilized. And there's so much of the mental illness and all of that.

So, I just I hope that. The big key is to get anything accomplished anywhere you really have to change hearts before you can change minds with your information. So it's really, really important that the public knows the difference between these kinds of people. Instead of... Because when you talk about homeless, the public has this impression of the person panhandling. That's not really the reality.

So getting that information out in public education and really getting the public behind you and making the public educated is, I think, one of the key first steps that really nobody's doing a good job of. We did for a while here in the city of Orlando do a great job with that. I mean an amazing job. And tons of money was raised and we got the publicity but that's something it's really hard to keep going on a constant basis at that levels not a fact. As a matter of fact, it's almost impossible is what I'm trying to say.

But that is what it takes; it's getting the community engaged and involved and the government pushing for a solution. Not deciding the solution, letting the experts know, you know what they expect. These are what your goals are, but let them figure out how to do it. But the education and public awareness piece is so crucial and not really put where it needs to be.

Question

I'm certainly a proponent of, you know, positive information. PR. 19 tools of government, you know, Smokey Bear and how successful that campaign was. You know, instead of having government do everything. It's like enlist the support of everybody. And only you can prevent forest fires or whatever. So obviously the PR piece could then. I see a theme emerging here. Sustainability. You know like you talked about Thomas, you know. We did great for a while. But it's hard to keep up that level of your commitment to, you know, again the other problem was to, you know, to the families or to the veterans or whatever. And so, what do you see? Forgive my ignorance. In this regard. I mean, Is there a... Do we have like a homeless czar? Or, something like that here, that you have one overarching person? Or is it just kind of a hodgepodge of hopefully we all work together?

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

Well, you know, some people would say, oh, we don't need homeless czar. I would disagree with that. I would say Andrae Bailey was about as close to a homeless czar as we had. And he really engaged the city. He got the sports teams involved. He got big business involved. Lots and lots of money came in.

The bright side of that is it could be spent any way that we needed. The big problem that we have is the government gives these grants out to organizations and have so many ties. It ties the organizations hands from doing what they even really want to do in some cases. And I'll let them speak on that if it's accurate or not. But I feel it is. Based on my experience. The big key is getting money that you can use in an effective way without all these strings. And so to do that, you have to raise public dollars. And that's the only way you can do it. They can't do it through grants because you're going to do X, Y and Z or you're not going to get the grant.

Bruce Matthews, Clean the World

I'll touch on that. In the sense that "Clean the World" was started as a 501c3 charity. And very quickly thought they would get all these grants and all that. And it wasn't happening. So very quickly switched to a social enterprise, a B corporation, where the dollars we bring in we can decide how best to spend them for the best uses as opposed to being restricted. So we do have a charity side of our business also, but the social enterprise side does not have those restrictions. And so we work with government, we work with corporations, we work with all kinds of different companies to bring in the dollars that we need to do the service we provide.

Thomas Rebman, Homeless & Hungry Initiative

Here's the big thing. Without somebody that the community and the government leaders see as the person. The point person on homelessness. You have many organizations that they're all trying to... For example, IDignity. What a great service. I mean, I can't tell you how many people when I was homeless in Orlando I watched go to IDignity and what they do. And I can go on.

I stayed with the Coalition for the Homeless right after it opened. As a matter of fact, it had been open two days when I was living homeless in Orlando. And, I literally stayed there. So

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what these organizations do is great. But the problem is these organizations; let me say it this way. A nonprofit is nothing more than a business with a different tax code. People don't realize that, you know, lots of nonprofit leaders would love to go do this, but they don't have the dollars to do it when they're not being paid to do that. So they can't extend that far. And so that's one of the big issues we have within the system.

But the big key is just having somebody that's seeing everything that's happening, like the continuum of care does, the homeless services network here is the ones that are seeing what's happening overall, but in the community. You don't know who that point person is and you don't have that huge level of engagement that we used to have in the Re-think homeless days, you know, that kind of thing. It's very difficult because how to get the dollars and how to distribute the dollars becomes a huge issue without that point person.

Question

Let me say... you spoke of Andrae... He was very, very public. Very public on the point of almost too public. But he got that recognition that you're talking about. So it's going to take that kind of publicity to get us back to the point to where we have the dollars to spend like you would need to spend. But it's going to take somebody just like to just stand up and say I'm the man. I'm the one who's going to do this. I'll make sure money is flowing and I'll be the face. We don't have a face anymore.

Danielle Ladall, IDignity

See, I would I would take a different approach. I think there is a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes. You know, there's the glory of the public relations campaign. Of look at all this stuff, look at, you know, but when that all dies down, because eventually public relations, there's highs and lows, right? Yes, you're right. You can't just stay in Yay! This you know, this is the thing we're going to care about for now and forever more. But there's the people who are continuing to work. Right.

There's the people at the shelters. The team that there's, you know. The team of social workers. The team of case managers who continue to do this tirelessly. And I think that they're even if there's not one person I mean, there is a wonderful, wonderful leader at Homeless Services Network who's in that agency is it's central agency of continuum care. But you have different leadership styles. Right. And there's so much going on right now that that is still pulling in funds and still raising awareness just in different ways.

Just recently the secretary of HUD. Yeah. Secretary of HUD had come by and surprised the community with a huge amount of money because of the work we've been doing with homelessness. Right. And so I think that there are different phases that a community goes through in figuring out how to handle homelessness and part of it is leadership styles, right. That there's a lot going on. And the importance of a lead agency like that. An importance of continuum of care does allow organizations like IDignity to say, okay, we're going to do this one thing, right? We're going to focus on identification. And then the coalition can focus on

the housing piece and the overnight stays. And then they don't have to worry about the identification of pieces. We're going to work on that. Right? But we aren't going to be able overnight stays because I would be horrible at that. We don't even. We have a building that's like 500 square feet. We don't even have space. Right. And so, because we can collaborate, because we have that centralized communication between agencies. That's what allows us to be effective as well. Because we can each handle the pieces that we become experts at.

Christine Cleveland, Orange County Public Schools

Yeah. And I think one of the things I see happening to us, is that one. We're so large. Not just geographically, but like just the number of people we're trying to serve. And then which people, to your point, do we serve?

And so I think it would be beneficial in a sense to have a point person to bring everybody's thoughts to say, we can serve this group of people and this is how many we can serve and so on. Because what's happening is from a standpoint of somebody who provides referrals, we say, Call 211 and we get eye rolls because everything's at capacity.

It doesn't mean that those people are doing great things or that they're not servicing thousands of people. But we have tens of thousands of people who need support. And in various different categories with various different needs. And I think it's almost breaking those down to like do the categories and then outline where our agencies are to say who can service this in this smaller area. You know, I didn't. And you might be able to get somebody else on the East End that could serve just a few hundred people. And then we could do something similar. But maybe people on the East End don't even realize it's a need, you know, and or that that could even be done. And I think those are the kind of conversations that maybe not even a point person, but I think bringing a few point people together to bring them in because we only come in with the knowledge we have at that moment.

And I think, again, to your point of leadership styles, I see a lot of leaders doing this work that are doing great work, but they're coming in only with the knowledge that they have from their own personal experiences. And that makes it hard for us to hit the tens of thousands of people that we're trying to serve and we go through.