

Interrupting Isolation

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Colleen Sinsky is a retention worker at JOIN, which works to help people experiencing homelessness secure and maintain stable housing.

My heart breaks each time I am listed as the sole “emergency contact” above a blank “next of kin” line on an apartment application. It is sadly not uncommon for people who have been homeless to lack even that basic human need: a reliable person to call when things go wrong. Of course I am honored and humbled to be the emergency contact for the folks I work with, but the fact that I am in that role as a housing advocate points to a larger issue of isolation among homeless individuals.

I work at JOIN, whose mission is to support individuals in their transition out of homelessness through street outreach and relationship building. At JOIN, we often talk about how homelessness is as much about “poverty of relationships” as it is about financial poverty. The experience of becoming homeless and then existing on the margins of society is incredibly alienating and dehumanizing.

Try this thought experiment: If you suddenly experienced some major destabilizing impact, or combination of events, how would you respond?

Loss of income, major medical diagnosis, death of a spouse, large debt, foreclosure, etc., often contribute to a person or family becoming homeless. Now couple one or more of those events with complicating

factors such as mental illness, criminal history, having grown up in the foster system, chemical addiction, history of abuse and trauma, lack of assets or ability to get credit, lack of education, disability, etc. Obviously the list of factors contributing to marginalization continues indefinitely.

If your life experience includes one or more of those factors, it makes dealing with any destabilizing impact that much more difficult. Those who haven’t experienced poverty and are fortunate enough to have a network of support and resources might not be able to imagine themselves in the situation of literally having nowhere to turn. I know that I personally can think of dozens of people, friends and family in my life who would be willing and able to help me if I called them needing help. But having anywhere near that level of community support is non-existent for people who have grown up in generational poverty and whose extended network — if it hasn’t already been burnt out on helping — is otherwise financially unable to help.

My point is that homelessness is often as much about loneliness and isolation from community as it is about economics. For those who are sleeping outside, life usually lacks the positive human connections that those of us “housed” individuals take for granted. Reality becomes a day-to-day routine of existing in survival mode,

possibly self-medicating, rarely being validated or feeling loved, and feeling too jaded by life’s experience to be able to hope for a better future.

Our community’s response to homelessness requires more than affordable housing options and flexible funding. In order to effectively interrupt the isolation that causes chronic homelessness, a shift towards a more holistic, relationship oriented and strengths-based approach is needed. We should view homeless people as complicated individuals who have demonstrated incredible resilience in surviving the hand they have been dealt. We need to empower individuals by first demonstrating they are worth being reached out to, and in doing so begin to destroy the isolating walls that homelessness and hopelessness have constructed around them.

Like all of my coworkers at JOIN, I am listed as the sole emergency contact for many of the formerly homeless people whom I work with and genuinely care deeply about. When our folks are in the hospital or hospice, it’s not uncommon for us to be their only visitors. And when they pass away, we grieve and honor each of them by carrying their memory forward with us. This real and compassionate level of authentic human connection is as necessary as housing.

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