



NONE OF US ARE HOME UNTIL ALL OF US ARE HOME

Project HOME Philadelphia Budget Hearing Public Testimony on May 26, 2021

Testimony by Sister Mary Scullion, Executive Director

(abbreviated version presented by Jennine Miller, Director of Advocacy and Community Engagement)

My name is Sister Mary Scullion, and I am the Executive Director of Project HOME, a Philadelphia non-profit organization empowering individuals to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness through affordable housing, employment, health care, and education. Every day we see first-hand the need for housing. Because of that need, we have developed 936 units of affordable and supportive housing for persons who have experienced homelessness and low-income persons at-risk of homelessness in the City of Philadelphia. We also collaborate with all street outreach teams through the Homeless Outreach Coordination Center for the City of Philadelphia and run the Hub of Hope in SEPTA's concourse at Suburban Station that serves about 300 guests each day. Our current projects include creating units for people who are aging, in recovery, exiting foster care, and/or identify as LGBTQIA. Specifically, each project needs capital, operating (rent subsidies), and support services funding to meet the full needs of our residents. We feel challenged to fund larger projects which can serve diverse populations, and which can more quickly meet the urgent needs of Philadelphia's most vulnerable.

Linda's Story – Housing with Supports Works

I want to start by telling you about a member of our community. Linda Costello had all the things you need for stability. A job, a car, and a home. Like so many, when she lost her job at a mail-order pharmacy in 2018, she lost everything and was left without a home. Linda ended up staying in shelters — sleeping on chairs during the night, developing infections on her legs, and living in cramped conditions with many other women in need.

She found her way to Project HOME's Hub of Hope in Suburban Station. The Hub's medical team was able to help take care of her physical health and focused on Linda's goals, health, and relationships. The support that Project HOME provided to Linda every step of the way helped her find a permanent home in one of our buildings. She was able to stabilize her income with the support of staff from the Homeless Advocacy Project who worked fearlessly to connect her with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) after she was previously denied. Now she advocates for others and for the return of the State's monthly cash assistance program, General Assistance (GA). She likes where she lives because she is treated with respect and courtesy, and staff have opened their arms and their hearts to her. She believes that Project HOME did not just provide her with a home, but also saved her life.

Especially in a pandemic, we clearly see that we must ensure that housing is recognized as a key determinant of health, and that housing options meet the needs of our community. We know the need is great in our city. Philadelphia has a 23% poverty rate, one of the highest in the nation. Of that 23%, half live in deep poverty, with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty line. About 10,000 people experience homelessness in Philadelphia over the course of a year; about 1,000 people, who are just like you and me, sleep on our city streets on any given night. We have the highest poverty rate and yet the lowest rate of street homelessness among America's ten largest cities, so we have a real opportunity – indeed, an obligation, to do even more to prevent and address poverty – and the many associated personal and systemic challenges it presents - before it turns into homelessness. We must also correct systemic racism that disproportionately leaves people who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOCs) without access to permanent housing.

As Linda's story shows, homelessness is a complex problem that requires multiple affordable and accessible housing resources. It is a national problem and can only be solved with a substantial federal commitment. Now, more than ever, we are encouraged to see the Federal Government increasing their investment in a variety of housing solutions - both from a human perspective and a financial one.

With that in mind, and the knowledge that there is \$42 million in additional federal resources for homelessness coming to Philadelphia, and with Council's leadership an additional \$400 million in Neighborhood Preservation Initiative funds, I would like to focus on what is specifically needed in the areas of housing, jobs, and services in the Philadelphia FY2022 Budget and Five-Year Financial Plan.

Housing

Project HOME's specific area of focus is ending and preventing chronic street homelessness, especially for people with behavioral health needs. There is no one-size-fits-all model, and a truly person-by-person approach is needed. Based on feedback from Outreach teams and participants living on the street, the most effective placements right now include COVID hotels, Safe Havens, respite beds, and dedicated shelter beds. All housing must be accessible to people with disabilities. The interventions below demonstrate the best ways to combat street homelessness:

- Long-term, permanent, supportive housing is the single most effective – in terms of cost and human need – way to end and prevent chronic street homelessness for people with behavioral health issues. Many of the recommendations below are pathways to permanent housing.
- Low-barrier, SRO-type units (single-room-occupancy) that are furnished, well-kept, and safe. The COVID pandemic uncovered a housing option that was requested and highly desired: COVID hotel rooms. People wanted their own furnished room with a television and bathroom.
- Safe Havens (small, specialized low-barrier programs) like our St. Columba and Women of Change. The most successful ones are 25 beds or smaller, and defined by high retention, case management and medical supports, and trained trauma-informed staff with focus on mental health issues.
- Respite like Project HOME's Sacred Heart Residence for people with pets, people who do not meet the criteria of safe havens, and couples or small adult families.
- Journey of Hope – long-term clinically-supported recovery housing, administered by the Department of Behavioral Health. These programs are most effective when participants are guaranteed a housing subsidy at the end of the program (if they need it).
- Housing First programs, in which people are placed immediately into housing from the street and then offered services appropriate to their needs and wants.
- Dedicated long-term shelter beds with direct outreach access.
- Young Adult housing prevents long-term homelessness among young people aging out of foster care, those who identify as LGBTQIA, and others.
- Housing with supports for aging starting at age 50 is desperately needed: 38 percent of people on the street are over age 50; given that mortality rate among people who are homeless is more than 25 years younger than the general population.
- Rapid Rehousing is effective if individuals have a history of prior independent living coupled with strong adult daily living skills. Others face barriers in the application process, including homelessness/transiency (hard to follow up), unchecked substance use/dependency, and untreated mental health disabilities.
- Recovery Focus: Prioritize (within the City's Office of Homeless Services (OHS) and the Continuum of Care) recovery-focused housing models.

Jobs & Services

Housing with supportive services that include education, employment, and medical (physical and behavioral) care is essential. This means that we are not only talking about the OHS budget, but also about Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disabilities, Public Health, Human Services, Prisons, and other departments which are key to both ending homelessness and preventing it in the first place. For providers, services funding is often the hardest piece of the puzzle, requiring significant annual private fundraising or limiting providers' ability to meet consumer needs.

Services

Access to funded services – including but not limited to those below - are critical to stability:

- Recovery services: both new recovery housing, long-term recovery-focused options, and addiction treatment on demand
- Close racial disparities: Address disparate city response to addiction in communities of color.
- City Preparedness: Advocate for a city emergency plan for people experiencing homelessness informed by a debrief about what we have learned this past year during COVID-19.
- Emergency Response: Improve policy and practice of integrating behavioral health support in emergency response system.
- Access and quality of behavioral health resources: Research from the Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness (CICH), found that 72 percent of participants had a substance use disorder and 76 percent had a mental illness.

Jobs & Income

Jobs and income are another essential support for people to transition from homelessness:

- Pilot and expand creative approaches to employment.
 - Project HOME has a partnership with the Free Library of Philadelphia where we employ people who are formerly homeless as restroom attendants, which offers people an entry into employment and a support to those who are still homeless.
 - Certified Peer Specialist certificates in partnership with Mental Health Partnership, which trains people with lived experience of homelessness, mental illness, and/or recovery for roles in social services.
- Expand job slots for Peer Employment: people with lived experience of recovery, homelessness, mental health conditions and incarceration.
- Access and Stability: Expand supports like childcare for job seekers and programs for temporary worker or gig workers.
- Skill Development: Fund computer training and career connected education to improve access to living wage jobs.
- Public Benefits: Maintain and expand programs to increase access to public benefits like **BenePhilly**; educate on connection between work and SSI/SSDI.

Conclusion and Resources Needed to Create Opportunities

To make these ideas happen, resources are needed in the Philadelphia budget.

- Housing Resources: Increase the Housing Trust Fund and dedicate 50% for Extremely Low-Income people and increase utilization of Philadelphia Housing Authority Vouchers
- Land Bank: Transfer all eligible public land, create process to get tax-delinquent land, and put all land to community benefit (affordable, accessible housing, and gardens)

- Larger Developments: Given the urgency of the problem, doing some larger developments of 100 units instead of 50 speeds up the process and achieves economies of scale so we can meet increased demand.

In conclusion, Philadelphia needs a multi-point strategy to make sure that the most vulnerable residents can find their way home. City Council's leadership to create housing coupled with health care and employment opportunities is the key to stabilizing housing needs as we enter the next phase post-pandemic. As you look toward finalizing the budgets for Homeless Services, Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disabilities, Public Health, Prisons, and emergency response systems, we ask that you prioritize paths to long-term stability for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with behavioral health needs. We hope to continue the conversation with you as new local and federal resources become available to meet the goals we outline above so that we can together fulfill the vision that "None of us are home until all of us are home."