

CHRISTY RESPRESS

NCSSS ALUMNI AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF PATHWAYS TO HOUSING DC

Albano: What was it about Catholic University that made you want to attend?

Christy Respress: I was living in Georgia, in high school, and I had actually never heard of Catholic University until a friend's sister was going. We traveled up to drop her off for college, and I was blown away. It felt very surreal to be going to Washington, D.C. And so when I saw that the school was right in the heart of the city, I was really excited. I was fortunate to receive an archdiocesan scholarship which made attending possible. I hadn't really considered social work as a career. At that point, I knew I wanted to help people, and, in my mind, that meant psychology.

I started in the psychology department and very quickly realized it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted a more direct connection to social justice and to direct services. And fortunately, someone said, "Well, that sounds more like you want to be a social worker." And I thought, I don't want to be a social worker. All I knew was what was on TV. And then I reached out and I met with Dr. Raber and after a conversation with her it kind of clicked that this is actually the perfect place for me. It really really spoke to me around understanding and working with the whole person in the context of their community. And it felt like a career that allowed me to bring together all of those things that were important around justice and working with people in their communities.

Albano: Was there a time during your undergrad here that you decided that you wanted to work towards helping the homeless?

Christy Respress: Actually, in high school, I had some experiences with my church, and that's when I first opened my eyes in New York City. I was doing some volunteer work, very briefly, but it opened my eyes to just the fact that people were literally living on the street. And I really leaned into that at Catholic, where I was very involved in the volunteering down at DC Central Kitchen and saw that I really could get connected to homeless services. And then I did my field placement with Coalition for the Homeless in Washington DC because that was really my passion.

It really was the field placements that allowed me to get the real world experience. That coupled with the volunteer work I did at Catholic, at DC Central Kitchen, really just connected all the dots. And so after graduating, the job that I was interning at with Coalition for the Homeless, offered me a position. And I've been in homeless services ever since.

Albano: And so after that job, you eventually found a way to Pathways?

Christy Respress: Pathways didn't exist so after Coalition to the Homeless, I got a dream job, which was street homeless outreach with Christ House and Unity Health Care. There were really no street outreach programs at the time in the district in the nineties except for faith based opportunities.

I was on a medical van with a health care provider, and we spent our days and our evenings walking the streets of D.C., and in the parks, and the alleys, visiting shelters and underpasses. And I was the social worker on the team, partnered with a doctor. And for me, that is what changed my life. It really opened up my eyes to the fact that people who are living with serious mental illness and substance use challenges on the street were not getting what they needed. Because every housing program that I tried to connect people to denied people housing because they had to be clean and sober. Because if they had a mental illness, they need to be taking psychiatric medications. Because, they couldn't have a criminal background. All the things that we were supposed to be working with people on were barriers to them getting the basic thing they needed, which was housing.

And so I just needed to learn more and I went back to grad school. That's how I went to Howard for my MSW. And it was there doing research for the department chair of the School of Social Work that I stumbled on an article about Pathways to Housing in New York City and this idea of Housing First and this light bulb went off. So I moved to New York City and worked at Pathways to Housing there. I did frontline work on a mental health team, a Housing First team and then a few years in Pathways. The Department of Mental Health here in D.C. reached out to Pathways in New York City and said, "we need you to replicate this program in the district." And my boss at the time, the founder of Pathways and Housing First movement said, "Christy, can you help get it started back in D.C.?" I've been with Pathways here in D.C. ever since. And I'll tell you, we started working with people that I had been doing outreach with five years earlier, who were still on the street. But now I could offer them housing.

Albano: Could you describe what Housing First is?

Christy Respress: The Housing First idea was started at Pathways to Housing in New York City in the early 90s, and it came out of listening to people. When you ask a person who's experiencing homelessness. How can I help you right as a social worker? Our job is to elicit from someone, how do we help you? It's not for me to decide what someone should need or want, but asking people, "How can I help you?" And as you can imagine, most often people said, housing, I need housing. But that's not what programs offered at the time. You need treatment first. You need stabilization first. You need detox first. Housing was the last thing on the list at the time.

So Housing First came out of listening to people asking them what they want and if they said they want housing, then we consider them ready for housing. We started working with people with serious mental illness who were just cycling in and out of the hospitals

in New York City and not getting treatment. Definitely not getting housing. So it wasn't working for them, right? So when we finally listened and said housing, that meant we gave people the housing of their choosing, which is an apartment. Plus the wraparound support services, in our case, a team of people working with people in their home. And that's what Housing First is. It's been around now since the early 90s. But, it took a long time for it to become the best practice that it is today. Now, the Pathways Housing First model is the only evidence based practice that's listed as proven to be effective and works for people with chronic homelessness. It's researched. It's evidence based. It's been replicated not just around the United States, but all over the world. It is the best practice in Canada, in Europe and again, it's the only model that has evidence based research that shows if you follow this model, the housing outcomes for people are incredibly high.

Albano: What was the best practice that everyone was using before

Housing First?

Christy Respress: Shelter. So, you know, homelessness is a newer thing in our country. There has always been deep poverty in our country, but we have not had homelessness. I don't know that you can imagine that there was ever a time that you didn't walk down the street in D.C. and see people sleeping on the street. Homelessness exploded in our country, especially for families and for people with disabilities, psychiatric specifically in the late 60s, early 70s and then into the 80s with family homelessness as a result of very specific policies made by our government around disinvestment and lack of affordable housing, livable wages, a minimum wage that didn't keep up. It was a good thing that we were starting to close psychiatric hospitals. The bad thing is that we did not create the programs of community based mental health care and housing supports that people need when they are discharged.

All of those things together became a real crisis. And just like in a natural crisis, like a hurricane, or any kind of natural disaster, the first thing you do is make sure people have food, clothing and shelter. That's a crisis response. And that's what we did in this country. We had a crisis response and the response was shelters, with this idea that people would just be short term. But what happened is that people got stuck in shelters. Because there was nowhere to go, because of our disinvestment in affordable housing and our lack of livable wages. So the next best thing to do is start creating transitional housing programs like temporary housing, where we're going to teach people the skills to live. But you know, where are people transitioning to when, again, when there's still no affordable housing on the other side? So we've created a crisis response services system and our homeless shelter system that became like the permanent solution.

And that's how chronic homelessness really started is that people got stuck. Chronic homelessness just means someone who's experiencing homelessness for a year or more, and that's what we focus on at Pathways. So the "best practice" at the time for the 70s, 80s and into the 90s really was shelter and then housing for people who are "ready" for housing. People who could prove that they could jump through all these hoops might get housing on the other end. So Housing First revolutionized the housing continuum of care in the country, which is really sad, but it has worked for years. Services don't lead to ending homelessness. People need employment. Then they need mental health treatment. They need all those things. But you can't do that if people don't have a safe place to sleep at night. A place where they're not experiencing trauma.

And in the early years, there were a lot of naysayers.

I remember traveling all over the country with the founder of Pathways to Housing, Dr. Sam Tsemberis trying to convince communities that this could be done in their communities, but people didn't believe it could happen. George W. Bush appointed a homeless czar, Phil Mangano, who said, "We need to end homelessness in this country, especially people sleeping on the street," and they had to find models that worked. There was really none. There were no evidence based models except for Pathways. It was having these fantastic outcomes, right?

Because people are staying in housing about 85 percent of the time, whereas in programs that required treatment, housing success rates were about 45 percent. So it was a proven model. It started to change because the federal government started investing in it. The National Alliance of Homeless and Homelessness started challenging cities to end homelessness, not to maintain it, but to create 10-year plans to end homelessness. Funding often changes the way we do things. And so communities had to start seeing how do we do this differently and not just maintain people in homelessness, but actually end it, actually end it.

Albano: So in 2017, we saw the first rise homelessness in a very long time. And now, especially post-pandemic, it's become a very prominent talking point. Do you see a big difference between the way we talk about homelessness today compared to, let's say, 1986, when we had millions of people holding hands for Hands Across America?

Christy Respress: What really caught Americans eyes is how is this possible where families, women, and children are sleeping in cars and on the streets. What has changed is a number of things, we know the solution. We know that ending homelessness is possible. It's a matter of political will. That's what it comes down to and I'm actually very frightened right now. We are seeing another change. There's been a recent political move to say that Housing First is increasing homelessness because numbers have risen.

Well, the math that just actually doesn't make sense. We have housed record numbers of people in this country. What you see, if you map the wages and the cost of housing, those things continue to rise way beyond what any average American can afford. So they're astronomically rising. So, of course homelessness is going to rise if we're not keeping up with wages and housing costs. It is a simple math problem. What we have seen is dramatic reductions in veteran homelessness. We have reduced the number of families in homelessness in D.C.

Albano: What has been the biggest policy change in D.C. since you started in this field until now?

Christy Respress: Oh, very easily. It's a housing first policy. When we came to the district and started in 2004, housing first was not a thing.

And actually around the country was still only happening in New York City. And honestly, there were little pockets of like programs doing this on their own, seeing the same thing the Pathways was seeing in New York. But it wasn't on any kind of scale. So when we brought the model to the district in 2004, first thing we did was reach out to the existing community providers working with people experiencing homelessness and other mental health agencies and saying, "Hey, we're new in town, we can you refer us people who have serious mental illness, who've been on the street for years because we're going to offer them housing and then our mental health wraparound support services in their home." And we were told no. People did not want to refer people to us because they thought we were setting them up for failure. And these were long established organizations.

But they were worried that we were going to just put people in housing and then forget about them. We started our own street outreach and we went to our partners like Health Care for the Homeless. And they believe me. They started referring to Miriam's kitchen. So for several years, we were the only housing first provider. But then in 2008, under Mayor Fenty, he was rising to the challenge to say, as a city, we are going to end chronic homelessness, period. And in order to do that, there's only one method that was proven to work and it was housing first. So the biggest change we saw was in 2008, The city said we are going to start funding at scale and Pathways at this point was starting to grow.

Those very providers who did not refer to us in 2004 had started to see our results over the years with the same people they have been working with for decades sometimes being successful in housing. And that's when we saw the providers, the nonprofit organizations saying, "OK." The city said, "If you want the money for our housing program, you have to do housing first." The only way we're going to end homelessness in this country is to focus on resources and creativity. It's about the budget. Our budget is what reflects our values and our morals as a community. And if we don't pay for it, if we don't prioritize it as a city, it won't happen. But D.C. did that. And so we are starting to really see those changes.

Albano: What is your day to day like as the executive director of Pathways to Housing DC?

Christy Respress: We have an amazing staff who are doing the day to day work providing our whole continuum of services. Pathways is now the largest housing first provider in the region, meaning we have seven hundred and fifty people, and growing, in their own apartments with wraparound support services. So my job is making sure our staff have the resources they need. So whether that's going to budget oversight hearings and advocating for resources at the city level or working as part of coalitions to change policies. And one great example of that is working with coalitions in the district to change some of the rules at the housing authority that are really putting up barriers around people with legal who have criminal backgrounds and blocking or slowing down their access to housing by changing laws that get in the way.

So advocacy is a big part of my job. And then fundraising, of course, is a piece of it.

You know, we have a very, very strong model for housing where the government, whether it's federal or local, pays for the housing, which is the way it should be, right? And then we have other service contracts for the support of services, but there's always gaps that the government is not going to fill. That's where we look to our community partners to help us with things like a fully furnished apartment that someone moves into. If you're living on zero income, moving into an apartment and sleeping on the floor like you were on the street is not dignified and it's not healing. So we make sure everyone moves in with a fully furnished apartment. So that takes fundraising and partnering with the community. And so that's a big part of my job as well, because I think at the end of the day, it's really about making sure that our incredible staff have the tools and the resources they need to further our mission, which is to end homelessness for people with disabilities.

Albano: Do you have any advice for NCSSS students who are trying to get to social work? Who might be anxious about what might lay ahead after graduation?

Christy Respress: Oh my gosh, so much. And I'll try to keep it brief. One is we need you. We need social workers and community behavioral health. We need to ensure social workers in the community. We need social workers everywhere. We have special needs for you right now in community based programs, doing the work on the front lines. And I would say that social work is an amazing career. I didn't start as a social worker thinking that I would become an executive director or a CEO. That was not my plan. And what I love about social workers is that as a social worker, you have so many skills and can take your career in so many different directions.

Whether it's into advocacy, whether it's into leadership at a nonprofit, or a hospital for profit, but your paths are so wide, so get the experience in the front line because I will say what's invaluable to me as a leader in this organization. So I would say this, if you are going to be a social worker it is an incredible career and we need you.

Albano: The Bible is full of references referencing helping the poor and the homeless, and it often calls upon us to act. As members of the Catholic University community, what can we do to improve the lives of the homeless?

Christy Respress: A couple things, I think one is to be social justice warriors, focus on issues of race and equity and inclusion. We cannot talk about ending homelessness without talking about race in this country.

So you need to get involved. Start with yourself and understand what does that mean? What does implicit bias mean? What does it mean to have privilege? If you're a person who is not of color in this country but, understand yourself, but also understand the root causes of this issue? Right? Homelessness is not a moral failing. Period, full stop. Homelessness is a system failure. By the time a person is experiencing homelessness, we as a community have failed them. The education system, the social safety net system, the housing system, etc. So as people, as social workers, I say fight for justice. Fight, fight for equity. Understand the impact of historical racism on this issue. Because if you don't understand that root cause, you're going to be looking for the wrong solutions. So educate yourself.

And then if you're moved to get involved personally, come volunteer or intern at organizations like Pathways. For us is really key because that's where you will get your best education and have some direct impact. And then on a personal level, talk to people, talk to people experiencing homelessness so that they're not invisible. That is a number one thing I often hear people say on the street is that people walk right by, People forget that they're human. So talk to people, connect in any way that you can and then advocate for permanent change so that we're not just ending homelessness for the person today, but that we're preventing homelessness from ever happening in the first place. We need you there, too.

Albano: Thank you for taking the time out of your day to talk to about your work. I really appreciate it.
