HOUSING-FOCUSED SHELTER: A BETTER PLAN THAN HOPE

My personal journey from hope to housing

by Michael Block, Chief Housing Officer

ABOUT 11 YEARS AGO, pretty soon after I started working at the Shelter, a frustrated emergency room doctor challenged me and asked why he kept fixing up the homeless, sending them out the door, only to have them back the next day, with the same issue. “Why are we doing this?” he asked. “It’s just a big waste of time and money. What’s the point?” I was embarrassed and defensive. I was mad too, mad that I was being asked to not only justify my choices but his too, his world. If you don’t want to face the ugly side of serving the needy, of a broken system, then fine, don’t serve the needy.

But ultimately, I was confused. Confused because I didn’t have an answer. Not necessarily for him, but for me. If I couldn’t articulate the point of it, why was I doing it?

We do it, I finally thought, because we have hope. We have hope that if we can keep them alive for another day, it might be the day they do something different. It might be the day they decide to fight. It might be the day they decide to change.

It felt good to have an answer. Frankly, it was a relief to find a way to avoid all of the blame, and while I didn’t realize it then, to shift some of the blame onto our clients.

I can’t tell you how many times I told this story over the years. I told it to our staff, board members and colleagues. I told it to friends. I told it to the police, to fire fighters, and to paramedics. I told it to everyone. I loved challenging, even defeating, their cynicism. I loved offering them a different, better version of their actions and themselves. I loved calling them the heroes of the neediest and offering them the nobility of having hope. Maybe they too felt a little better about themselves. Maybe they too felt more purpose. Maybe they even treated the homeless just a little better.

I think when you are a social worker, surrounded by an overwhelming need, standing in the middle of a homeless shelter, if you look too deep, if you stop and stare too long, nothing makes much sense. For a lot of the clients, you can’t help but look and wonder where does this end? Is the hope that someone with a lifetime of tragic bad luck and chronic challenges will make a miraculous change and end their homelessness really a strategy, or is it something we tell ourselves to get through the moment, the day, the week and the year?

NOW, YEARS LATER, THE STORY IS ABOUT MY LIBERATION. About real purpose. It’s about honesty and being willing to deconstruct the image I had of myself, my charity, and trying to replace it with something better. It led to a very difficult realization.

This is Housing-focused Shelter

We believe everyone can re-establish independent housing and we are supporting each individual that we serve to achieve this. In the past year, we provided supportive services to 64 members of our community as they transitioned into, and maintained, housing.

One person and one home at a time, because of your support and in alignment with our new mission statement, we are finding the solution to homelessness.

The mission of the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless is to create avenues to stable housing for our community’s homeless adults, from a foundation of supportive and safe shelter.

“TODAY, WE FOCUS ON HOUSING AT THE SHELTER BECAUSE IT WORKS.”

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Director’s Dialogue

AS I WRITE THIS, THE SNOW HAS JUST BEGUN TO FALL. These are the kind of days that remind me, on a visceral level, of why our community offers services to our homeless population.

Tonight, 160 people will come to the Shelter for a safe, warm bed, a hot meal and a little bit of dignity. People like Nicole. Nicole came to the Shelter seeking relief from life on the streets. While we were able to offer her the basic necessities of life, we were also able to convince her that the Shelter was not the destination. Stable housing of her own was the long-term solution to her homelessness; and our collective efforts should be focused on finding her a housing solution. Nicole worked diligently with her case manager, despite significant mental health impairments, to find an appropriate housing option for her situation. It took some time but she now lives independently, with modest support, and no longer calls the streets home.

On behalf of all the Nicole’s in our community, thank you. With your support, the Shelter is not just a respite from the cold, but a pathway to stable housing for our community’s less fortunate.

Greg Harms, Chief Executive Officer

*For more information about Boulder County’s new effort to address homelessness, search for ‘Homeless Solutions for Boulder County’ on the County’s website.

Hope is a wish, a dream. It’s a tactic to get through the day, but it’s not a strategy to help the homeless, and when you are trying to bring relief to a life-and-death struggle, you have the obligation to have a better plan than hope. We owe it to them to have a better plan, because after serving the homeless in our country for 40 years, hope has not met the needs of our suffering people. Hope hasn’t worked.

TODAY, WE FOCUS ON HOUSING AT THE SHELTER BECAUSE IT WORKS. Because whatever the needs of the homeless are, it is always the best answer. We want them to find stability, and the best way to achieve that is to get them housed. Twenty-five percent of the Boulder County jail population is homeless, and the best answer is housing. The homeless are often hungry, and the best answer is housing. Our homeless spend millions and millions of uncompensated dollars at the hospital, and the best answer is housing. The homeless are frequently sick, often suffer from addiction, and battle severe mental illness, and the best answer is housing. All these conditions leave them at risk of freezing to death, and again the answer is housing. They are the recipients of terrible bad luck, and the best way to change their luck is housing.

Our people are homeless, and the best answer is to get them a home.

We are still heroic. Very. You, me and especially them. Together, we are still offering shelter and saving lives, night after night after night, but now we don’t have to wait and hope they change. Instead, we can fight with everything we have to get them housed, because it’s right, because it’s just, because it’s compassionate and because it works.
Anne A.

- How long have you been volunteering at the Shelter and in which volunteer positions have you participated?
  I have been at the Shelter for about five years. I volunteered at the old Shelter, when it was in a different building, further South on Broadway. I mostly do dorm supply, but cook dinner on occasion.

- What inspires you to volunteer at the Shelter?
  I am inspired to do my little piece to impact a problem as significant and widespread as homelessness. When the magnitude of an issue seems too great, it helps me to figure out what contribution I can make, to impact it in some way.

- What is your favorite part about volunteering at the Shelter?
  I enjoy meeting and interacting with residents, staff and other volunteers. I especially like the dorm supply position, as it allows me a few minutes to have a conversation when people come to the window.

- Most unique/favorite memory or interaction/s? Any surprises?
  While I always try to be respectful of everyone’s privacy, I do enjoy learning a little bit about people’s backgrounds. Talking with residents, other volunteers and staff is always a great reminder that we have more in common than we may initially think.

- What is something you like to do when you’re not at the Shelter?
  I enjoy reading, practically any form of storytelling, and spending time with family and friends. I moved to Boulder in junior high school so feel fortunate to live so close to people I have known for so long. I try to take advantage of the outdoor activities that come with living in such a unique and beautiful place.

- Any advice for new Shelter volunteers?
  I believe this will be a very rewarding experience for you because of the people you will meet and the community that we are fortunate to serve.

Last year, YOU made all this possible...

**HOUSING-FOCUSED SHELTER**
- 1,420 unduplicated clients served
- 51,702 bed nights afforded
- 109,637 meals served
- More than 700 hours of mental health support provided
- 125 individuals engaged in Case Management Services
- 2,094 case management contacts were made
- 64 clients exited the Shelter into independent housing

**PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING**
- 10 new housing vouchers from the City of Boulder meant an 18% increase in households served through PSH
- 64 individuals housed through Lee Hill facility and scattered site

**VOLUNTEERS**
- Nearly 900 volunteers contributed
- 13,271 hours
Give someone relief and a pathway to housing tonight

HOME TEAM
MONTHLY GIVING
is the most
CONVENIENT, EFFICIENT
and
EFFECTIVE
way to help our clients when they need it most:
EVERY DAY.

A Thousand Thanks…
…to the individuals, community partners, businesses, and foundations who financially sustain the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless.

With your support of the Boulder Shelter, you are relieving our community’s most vulnerable homeless adults of the immediate desperation of finding a safe place to sleep; you are ensuring that they have stable accommodation and meaningful support as a foundation for moving on from their challenges and into a permanent housing solution.

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