“BECAUSE YOU SEE ME, I EXIST.”

With these six words, two mothers who had been homeless with their children opened a celebratory event in Boston. Later in the program, one by one, twenty other previously homeless mothers took the microphone and each in turn addressed the audience of supporters with the words:

“Because you see me……..” each finished her statement with a uniquely personal achievement or aspiration.

“Because you see me, I am two weeks away from graduating with a Masters degree in communications.”

“Because you see me, my children are doing well in school.”

Not being seen is the worst hardship a human being can suffer. Consider the words of Joseph Wresinski, the founder of the international Fourth World Movement that works to break down social exclusion across the globe:

“For the very poor tell us over and over again that a human being’s greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or unable to read, nor even to be out of work. The greatest misfortune is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored. The worst blow of all is the contempt on the part of your fellow citizens. It is contempt that stands between a human being and his rights. It makes the world disdain what you are going through and prevents you from being recognized as worthy and capable of taking on responsibility. The greatest misfortune of extreme poverty is that for your entire existence you are like someone already dead.”

To place this perspective in context, bear in mind that: “40% of the world’s population does not have electricity; 33% of the world’s children under five suffer from malnutrition; 47% of the world’s population lives on less than two US dollars per day; while, the total wealth of the 200 richest people in the world is 1.14 trillion dollars.” A little closer to home, the income gap between the wealthiest and poorest persons in the US continues to grow, and with it, homelessness of both families with children and lone individuals.

FAMILIES IN POVERTY AND HOUSING INSTABILITY

Over the past twenty-five years, the United States government has disinvested in the production of low cost housing units and housing assistance, redirecting its resources
toward urban revitalization and home ownership, and, in response to the subsequent growth of homelessness in the country, toward homeless assistance support services and residential programs. Likewise, radical policy shifts and budget cuts have impacted families poor enough to use or be eligible for public assistance. In particular, the entitlement to welfare ended in 1996; five year lifetime limits for welfare receipt were established; and the majority of welfare-reliant families were required to enter the paid workforce. Work as the pathway out of poverty was widely supported by both policymakers and the general public. As of 2000, only 16% of families in poverty in the U.S. were utilizing welfare; down from 46% in 1973.

By 2006, more poor U.S. families did indeed have a head-of-household in the workforce; however, the squeeze between housing costs and incomes continues to threaten the housing stability of large numbers of working poor households. In no part of the United States can a full-time minimum wage worker pay for private market housing with just 30% of his/her income, a HUD standard for housing affordability.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, nearly 5% of all households in the country (5.1 million households) have worst case housing needs, that is, they pay more than 50% of their income for housing; they have no housing assistance, are renters and have incomes below 50% of the area median income (AMI). Most of these households have extremely low incomes (below 30% of AMI) and pay an average of 76% of their incomes for rent; many adults heading these households work in low wage jobs. Households headed by persons of color, elders, sole women with children and renters are more affected by the income-housing squeeze than are others.

The demand for low cost housing far outstrips the supply of housing subsidies or low-cost units. On average, an eligible U.S. household would have to wait nearly two and a half years for a Section 8 housing voucher. The wait is much longer in many communities across the country. One estimate of need, highlighted in the 2002 Millennial Housing Commission Report and cited in Bratt, Stone and Hartman, indicates that 250,000 low cost housing units would need to be created each year for the next 20 years to meet the demand.

MORE SHELTERS, FULL SHELTERS

Based upon the most extensive and conservative analysis to date, 2.3 to 3.5 million people are homeless in the United States annually, one percent of the United States population, six to nine percent of those in poverty and six to nine percent of children in poverty. An estimated three percent of the country’s population is homeless over a five year period. Contrary to widely held assumptions that lone individuals living on the street are the most typical ‘face’ of homelessness, children comprise 39% of those who are homeless in the United States each year. However, many children are living apart from their parents when homelessness hits the family; homeless men and women report...
that 74% of their children are not living with them when they are using homeless assistance services.\textsuperscript{16}

Families’ use of shelter nationally has increased over the past 15 to 20 years. Between 1987 and 2001, emergency shelters increased in size and were more likely to be full each day and night.\textsuperscript{17} As of 1996, emergency shelters in the United States served 239,600 persons per day on average\textsuperscript{18}; 40,000 homeless assistance programs in 21,000 locations were providing service to homeless men, women and children across the country’s urban, suburban and rural communities, nearly half located in central city areas.\textsuperscript{19}

\section*{THE COSTS OF HOMELESSNESS AND SHELTER LIVING}

\subsection*{The Economics}

Sheltering low income families is much more costly than providing them with rental assistance and/or other homelessness prevention resources. For example, Washington, DC spends $7,000 on average per family household for prevention as compared to $11,500 per household for shelter. In its first four years, 70-80\% of families served by its prevention program were successfully housed and had not fallen into homelessness.\textsuperscript{20}

In Massachusetts, the state spends $43,000 to $56,000 per family each year to secure shelter space for the families the state expects to shelter.\textsuperscript{21} In contrast, the state spent only $16,200 per family per year for a pilot transitional housing program with a history of success that allows each family to live in a private apartment and receive intensive service support.\textsuperscript{22} The state spends an average of $3,000 or less for families served by its homelessness prevention program.\textsuperscript{23}

For the past decade, Hennepin County, Minnesota has been a leader in implementing a community-wide homelessness prevention network and has evidence of its success. In 2002-2003, the County spent $472 on average per family for prevention services, with a 95\% success rate----no use of shelter for at least 12 months after intervention.\textsuperscript{24} Using a rapid-re-housing approach for homeless families, the County significantly reduced the time families lived in shelters and have documented an 88\% success rate; the average cost per family was $800 for this intervention. Finally, the cost of an intensive transitional housing program, an alternative to shelter, was $3,668 on average per family, resulting in a 96\% success rate.\textsuperscript{25}

The lion’s share of resources to fight homelessness in the United States is nonetheless tied up in maintaining and expanding the country’s residential emergency shelter system.\textsuperscript{26} Housing assistance resources, on the other hand, have been inadequate for over forty years and subject to relentless cuts, even though having a housing subsidy or access to low cost housing clearly prevents families from falling into homelessness or returning to the shelter system.\textsuperscript{27}
The Human and Social Costs

Shelter as an acceptable housing option for low income families is costly in other ways as well. The impacts of family homelessness on children and their parents are well documented. The humiliation of not being able to house one’s children rips at a parent’s core sense of self. When a mother feels this way, her children feel the pain as well.

Children are highly vulnerable. Forty percent of children in families surveyed in New York City family shelters, representing 75% of all children in shelters in the city, had asthma; half had symptoms consistent with mid to severe asthma; over half had used emergency rooms for medical care. Childhood homelessness is a risk factor for homelessness as an adult. Homeless mothers have reported that 39% of their children under 18 were not living with them and, for those children who were with their mother or father in a homeless assistance program, 46% of their parents reported that one or more of their children had had an alcohol, drug or mental health problem in the past month. Relentlessly high levels of stress, frequent dislocations that result in cut off from friends, family and familiar surroundings, discontinuity in educational experiences, and a sense of social exclusion are but a few of the realities in children’s lives when they are without a home; they share these realities with their parents, whose well-being is intricately intertwined with their own.

Children are also resilient. Developmental, social and emotional setbacks for children can be ameliorated if the surrounding environment provides safety and is conducive to development of their competence, curiosity, sense of empathy and connection to at least one responsive and caring adult. Parents have a greater chance of creating such an environment for their children when they themselves have a sense of economic and housing security. When families have no other alternative than shelter, the presence of a supportive, respectful, safe and predictable environment has the potential to reverse the damage sustained by both parents and their children on their traumatizing homelessness journeys.

UNDER A WATCHFUL EYE

Families who have secured living space in shelters in which they share kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms and laundry facilities with others find themselves under the watchful eye of other parents and children, as well as shelter staff; the staff have the power to offer resources that lead to housing and the power to take away shelter. Paradoxically, support for parents and children may be close at hand, however the closeness may contribute to unwanted staff intrusions into private family matters.

Inherent Complexities of Shelter Life.
Shelter life is anything but easy for families.
“My whole family was living in one room. Granted it was the biggest room in the house, but it was barely big enough for the five beds, a crib, and one large dresser. My children previously had their (own) room, a large backyard to play in, and a screened-in porch with their own bathroom. We had to adjust to sharing the room with several different mothers who each had one small child and didn’t seem to stay more than a few days…”

The potential exists for parents living in shelters to have their best and worst moments. At times hardship brings out the best in people. However, when stress is unrelenting, it is hard to shine. In shelter settings, parents may experience their authority with their children being at odds at times with staff who have a responsibility to ensure predictability and security for all who live in the shelter. The intimacy that housed parents have with their children in the privacy of their own homes is hard to come by for families living in congregate shelters. Parental routines with children have been disrupted for extensive periods of time during families’ harrowing journeys prior to entering shelters. This disruption continues in shelter settings where so many routines of daily living are alien to those of the individual families. When children begin to feel safe in a shelter setting, they may need to let down; predictable clashes are likely to take place between and among children in shelters. These moments may be embarrassing for parents if support and understanding from staff is lacking. Add to this circumstance the challenge of mixing parenting and family routines, norms, and traditions with families of different ethnicities who are living together in shelters, and you have a recipe for the exacerbation, rather than amelioration, of the effects of long-standing stress on individual children and their parents.

Working in and managing shelter programs is also challenging.

“At times, the issues were so great for a family that they just couldn’t see beyond their situation….I have been cursed out, I have been called every name in the book. At times, I’ve wanted to throw in the towel…and then at that moment someone or something would happen to remind me why I was doing the work…I know that my life was changed and I would say that (the family’s) life was changed by our interaction.”

Frontline staff and shelter directors also face challenges as they attempt to create environments that will ensure order, predictability, fairness, safety, and flexibility for all. For shelter staff, help-giving fatigue is not unexpected; absorbing family pain can and does take a toll. Limited time and space boundaries in shelter settings create a heightened intensity, one that is more taxing on shelter staff than is the case for help-givers who work in non-residential human service settings. The pressure on shelter staff is considerable. At times, the chemistry among parents, children and staff may be problematic and undoubtedly affects staff members’ stress levels on the job. They are held accountable if conflicts between and among family members get out of hand or if
anyone’s safety is put at risk on their watch. Finally, shelter staff constantly face dilemmas related to responding flexibly to unique family circumstances and requests, while trying to apply shelter policies and rules fairly.

MAXIMIZING SUPPORT AND MINIMIZING HARM.

Being under a watchful eye and being seen are qualitatively different experiences for parents and their children in shelters. Parents speak of negative encounters as ones in which they feel as though they are under a microscope; while they view positive helping encounters, ‘being seen’, as the triggers for transforming their lives. The paradox of help-giving, simply stated, is that seeing and accepting a man, a woman, a child, as is opens the door for growth.

Help-Giving Approaches

Professional or paraprofessional helpers, shelter staff in this case, have options regarding how they intervene in the lives of the families living in their shelters. Senge and his colleagues offer a relevant help-giving framework: helper as expert or helper as partner. Determining when to use which approach and assessing the impacts of each approach is worthy of reflection.

The helper as expert: diagnosing, giving advice, taking charge.

“As parents in shelters have many outside influences pressing down on them. The anger has to go somewhere...An asset-approach to helping parents in crisis can prove very effective, rather than using a deficit-approach or assuming that parents have negative intentions. I remember the phrase ‘Keep hope alive!’.” It picked me up when I felt myself sinking too low. The negative attitude of a staff person can bring down the best.”

An ‘helper as expert’ model of help-giving is one in which helpers fix the problems at hand, through taking charge or giving advice aimed at changing behaviors perceived by the helper to be causing the problems. Such a ‘take charge’ approach may be critically important for shelter staff to use during emergencies or when the safety of children and/or parents is threatened or when, after soliciting considerable input from those affected, a staff member makes a decision that simply has to be made. At its worst extreme, a ‘helper as expert’ approach may be harmful to families; a diagnosis orientation can inadvertently become a deficit-oriented lens that obscures seeing. Recently, a woman who directs an activist community organization in California likened her experience of being a human service client to feeling like a “turtle on its back”, completely helpless and at the mercy of help-givers. She had experienced the worst impact of a help-giving framework that emphasizes pathology, dysfunction and an obsession with compliance. These are the very barriers that lead parents to feel as though they are being treated like children or prisoners when they live in shelters. These are the very forces that drive men, women and youth to live on the streets, in their cars or in their own tent cities rather than
seek shelter. Parents submit to oppressive shelter situations because of their children. And, when treated badly, they leave shelter with a sense of bitterness and shame.

The helper as teammate, learning partner and facilitator.

“There are many who would challenge crossing the sometimes sterile boundaries between professional and relational roles...It is our experience that moves us to cross those boundaries. For among all of us who are first of all human beings, there is a search for meaning, a human cry for connecting, bonding...the experience of community.”

An ‘helper as partner’ model of help-giving is one in which helpers and families enter into a relationship with a vulnerability that opens the door for both to be changed in the process, a ‘power with’, rather than ‘power over’ relationship. Using this way of building relationships with families, helpers are called to be reflective, to let go of fixed, win-lose mindsets and to work toward equality in the relationship, to actively intervene without judgment. Each person has a core role to play; each holds the self and the other accountable. Both parties pay attention to active listening, teamwork, reciprocity, and the minimization of indebtedness. Two-way reflection on the relationship takes place in a context of safety. Helpers invite parents to actively question their suggestions. Parents expect to actively question and to share their insights. Together helper and parent consider alternative pathways to growth grounded in a parent’s dreams for herself and children. This way of working can be scary, as it requires professionals to let go of control and make a commitment to an inherently uncertain process.

This asset-oriented framework focuses more on how parents have overcome adversity and sustained their families and less on how they succumbed to hardship. ‘Strength spotting’ is the detective work undertaken in assessment processes grounded in this way of seeing; professional energy is focused on recognition of parents’ and children’s capabilities, positive intentions and adaptive survival strategies. The result is that both helper and parent see something new; the seeing together has a ‘healing quality’. Such encounters can lead to a deep internal transformation, a radical shift in the ways in which parents see themselves and tell their life stories, from stories of self-blame and victimization to ones that acknowledge external influences on the family’s circumstances and recognize parents’ resiliency in the face of hardship, and efficacy and hope as they move forward into the future.

Organizational and Programmatic Approaches that Promote ‘Seeing’

“A fundamental principle of communication is this: if we change our perceptions, we can change our feelings and ultimately our behavior...Staff are challenged to identify themselves not exclusively by what they do--by their roles and tasks--but to go deeper and understand their primary identity, the spirit from which
behaviors flow. Our roles and functions do not define who we are! We are, first of all, human beings who on life’s journey have developed significant assets, capacities, and gifts, while still having multiple needs that yearn for fulfillment. This experience has a leveling effect on all of us.”56

As reflected in the words above by the visionary leader of an agency that, among other services, operates a family shelter in Boston, an extraordinary commitment at an organizational level, from the top down, is required for reflective, respectful and collaborative practice to become the norm as staff members interact with each other and with the families they serve. Learning to act from such a trusting and collaborative stance takes skill and time. This organizational environment is not easy to create and is always a work in progress, even for those leaders and staff who are highly committed to these values.

**A culture of reflectivity.** Leaders and staff of learning organizations have to actively work toward establishing a culture of reflectivity that invites ongoing organization-wide self-examination, creativity and imaginative thinking.57 Across the whole organization, leaders will need to provide board, management, staff and families with concrete and practical ways of committing themselves to building a holistic organizational environment that fosters transformational relationships and community.58 Kofman and Senge’s design principles provide a framework for building the capacities of managerial leaders to promote such an organizational environment:

“(1) The learner learns what the learner wants to learn, so focus on key managerial issues; (2) The people who need to learn are the ones who have the power to take action, so focus on key operational managers, as opposed to staff; (3) Learning often occurs best through ‘play’, through interactions in a transitional medium where it is safe to experiment and reflect; (4) Learning often requires slowing down the action to enable reflection to tacit assumptions and counterproductive ways of interacting; or at other times, speed up time to reveal how current decisions can create unanticipated problems in the long term; (5) Learning often requires ‘compressing space’, as well as time, so that the learner can see the effects of his or her actions in other parts of the system; (6) This transitional medium must look like the action domain of the learners; (7) The learning space must be seamlessly integrated into the work space for an ongoing cycle of reflection, experimentation and action.”59

Concrete evidence of a dynamic learning environment, as applied to shelter settings, is the creation of leadership opportunities for staff and families, established avenues for them to have substantive decision making roles regarding the shelter’s daily operations, particularly those that directly impact the quality of their lives.60 Another example is the creation of time and space for planned, reflective conversations at staff and house meetings and using these dialogue spaces productively to re-examine organizational mission, values, purpose and effectiveness. Success in such efforts is dependent upon
effective professional development approaches that build staff competencies in teamwork, the de-escalation and mediation of conflicts, community building, and respectful, asset-oriented, and culturally competent practice.

Shelter spaces. Organizations desiring to lay the groundwork for transformational relationships and to bring out the best in parents, children and staff will need to create shelter spaces that foster community building and convey a message of respect, safety and warmth. The physical environment matters and deserves attention. Nearly half of the country’s emergency shelters serve over 100 people at a time. Barrack shelters are less common currently than they were twenty years ago; however some version of shared living is still characteristic of 69% of emergency shelters in the United States. Only about one-third of emergency shelters have indoor or outdoor play spaces for children.

To create a sense of home and to build community in shelters, while limiting tensions resulting directly from a lack of privacy and overcrowding, organizations will need to determine how many families they can maximally shelter at any given time. What are the possibilities and constraints of the physical environment? In what ways can shelter environments be designed to enable family members to remain together and to ensure that they are accessible for persons with disabilities?

RESISTANCE TO PERPETUATION OF THE SHELTER INDUSTRY: INVESTMENT IN PERMANENT SOLUTIONS

Organizations that provide shelter to homeless men, women and children are part of an extensive industry in the United States. Originally, shelters were established as ‘emergency’ housing; they are now woven into the fabric of most communities in the country. National, state and local homeless assistance organizations rely for their survival on resources directed specifically for those who are homeless. Without considerable soul-searching and intentional re-direction, such organizations could inadvertently find themselves engaged and invested in sustaining the problem, becoming dependent upon the continuation of homelessness and of ever increasing public, private, philanthropic and other homelessness-oriented resources.

An alternative pathway for sheltering organizations is to become change agents, building up alternative futures for their organizations that are directed toward implementing and advocating for the long term solutions, planning as if homelessness was on the decline. Such organizations, with deep knowledge of low income households’ circumstances, hopes and capabilities, are in a strong position to contribute to the development of low cost housing in their communities, to develop educational, income promotion and neighborhood safety net supports, and to advocate for a significant re-direction of public resources toward low cost housing, housing assistance and homelessness prevention.
“BECAUSE YOU SEE ME, I EXIST”

In conclusion, it is time to invest in what are known solutions for ending family homelessness in the United States. As a country, the disinvestments and cuts in low cost housing and housing assistance, as well as income support and education have inadvertently led to a perpetuation and institutionalization of shelter as a viable long-term family housing option; in many cases, shelter life has exacerbated family stress as well as parental depression and internalized self-blame.

Some states and local communities are mobilizing to put an end to homelessness through system-wide prevention efforts that seek to enable families to hold on to their housing before they lose it. Such efforts will fail to be successful without substantially higher federal investments in low cost housing, housing assistance, and income supports for low income households, as well as effective workforce development and education initiatives.65

Nonetheless, for now and the foreseeable future, many families without homes are left with no alternative but to live in a shelter for long or short periods of time. Real attention needs to be given to the quality of the shelter experience so that, rather than being watched, these families experience help-giving that effectively taps their aspirations, sets high expectations, provides high levels of support, and enables both parents and children to come out the other side full of pride, feeling whole as individuals and as a family, feeling connected, having sparkled, having been recognized, honored and seen.

1 This event, “Mothers of Inspiration” was sponsored by the One Family, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, May 2004.
5 National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), “FY 07 Budget Chart for Selected Programs,” http://www.nlihc.org/pubs and NLIHC, “The Crisis in America’s Housing: Confronting Myths and Promoting a Balanced Housing Policy,” http://www.nlihc.org/pubs. According to the NLIHC’s calculations, for the entire period from 1976-2006, relative to other programs that target low income people (income security, food and nutrition, social services, and Medicaid), federal funding for housing assistance has been much lower; when federal expenditures for those other programs began to rise in the 1990s to its current levels ($150-$360 billion range), housing assistance remained low ($30-$40 billion range).

See also the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), “Initial Assessment President’s 2007 Budget: Impacts on Housing Voucher Program and Hurricane Recovery,” Barbara Sard, Douglas Rice, and Will Fischer, Revised February 17, 2006, www.cbpp.org/2-17-06hous.htm. According to the CBPP, the President’s FY07 proposed budget cuts $622 million from the HUD budget (1.8%)—most cuts hit HUD programs other than homeless assistance which is proposed to increase over last year’s expenditures by 15.8%. A slight funding increase over 2006 is proposed for HUD’s housing voucher program; this increase will fund the same number of vouchers as in 2006, and will not fully make up for past cuts (65,000-100,000 federal vouchers were lost nationwide between 2004-2005).

6 Otherwise referred to as ‘welfare’ or Transitional Assistance to Needy Families [TANF].
8 National Low Income Housing Coalition, Out of Reach (Washington, DC: NLIHC, 2005).
12 Bi-Partisan Millennial Housing Commission, *Meeting our Nation’s Housing Challenges*, Submitted to the House of Representative’s and United States Senate’s Committees on: Appropriations and subcommittee for VA, HUD and Independent Agencies and other committees, Washington, DC, May 30, 2002; Bratt et al., 2006, 12.
13 Martha Burt and Aron, L. *America’s homeless II: Populations and services* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2000, February); These figures are low estimates, given that the calculations were conducted prior to August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit the New Orleans/Mississippi coast and an additional 2.2 million people were directly impacted by the Hurricane, according to the U.S. Census Bureau News, September 6, 2005, US Department of Commerce, Washington, DC at: http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/hurricanes_tropical_storms
18 Ibid.
23 Outcome data are not yet available.

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26 Center for Budget and Public Priorities, 2006.


31 Ibid.

32 Burt et al., 1999.

33 Ibid.

34 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.


38 Although standardization of daily routines is hard on families, guidelines for meal times, chores, curfews, supervision of children and many other daily routines are necessary to ensure smooth operations and predictability for all who live and work in shelter settings.

39 Rosa (Clark) Almanzar, mother and shelter director, Project Hope, in Friedman, 2000, 151-152.

40 Friedman, 2000.


42 Ibid.

43 Deborah Gray, in Friedman, 2000, 114.


46 Friedman, 2000.
47 Margaret Leonard, Executive Director of Project Hope, in Friedman, 2000, 153.
48 Senge et al., 2004.
52 Friedman, S., 2006.
53 Brecher and Friedman, 1993.
54 Senge et al., 107.
58 Ibid.
60 Wong, et al., 2001. Only 36% of shelters in the cities surveyed have resident or consumer councils.
63 Ibid.
64 By disallowing adolescents and fathers, many shelters in the United States contribute at times to harmful family separations.