

Conferring on Homelessness

Beyond Housing

The ICPH 2014 Conference

ICPH's 2014 conference, *Beyond Housing: A National Conversation on Child Homelessness and Poverty*, took place in New York City from January 15 to 17. The conference's approximately 450 attendees were able to choose from among 40 "breakout" sessions, with topics ranging from outreach for LGBTQ youth, to collaborations between homeless-services departments and day care centers, to the participation of homeless individuals in advocacy efforts.

The conference featured three stirring keynote speeches. ICPH president and CEO Ralph da Costa Nunez gave the first, on January 16, citing history to make the case for what he called "a regulatory system for poverty." The programs that grew out of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society, he noted, alienated many people who saw them as intrusions into their lives—with children bused to schools in other neighborhoods in efforts toward integration, for example, or low-income housing built in middle-class neighborhoods. That alienation set the stage for the election of Ronald Reagan, who presided over a dismantling of social programs that, despite their shortcomings, constituted much of the safety net in the U.S. That dismantling, Nunez said, contributed heavily to the current homelessness problem. Discussing the importance of that government safety net, Nunez pointed out that without such programs as food stamps, Medicaid, and Medicare, the current poverty rate of 16 percent would be closer to 32 percent. The lesson to be drawn from this, according to Nunez, is that while some programs have been flawed, the solution is not to end all programs—that the U.S. needs neither "big government" nor smaller government but good government. Nunez also argued that homelessness is a multidimensional problem with numerous causes and therefore cannot always be solved through rapid rehousing; he stressed the need not only to house families but to help them improve their overall circumstances to the point at which they are self-sufficient. He drew applause with the line, "Our job isn't to get homeless people off the street. It's to get homeless people on their feet."

Author, educator, and MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry gave a very well-received, humor-filled but trenchant lunch keynote on January 16. Posing the question "Why are people poor?",

Harris-Perry noted that race is "strongly determinative" when it comes to suffering from poverty. Discussing her own success, she explained that she came of age in a time of "high-quality, integrated public schools" and benefited from "aggressive affirmative action" programs. She pointed to historical as well as contemporary structural barriers to success for many racial minorities, from the decision to let states choose who received housing loans—a policy that worked against southern blacks—to a judicial system that in some states leaves up to ten percent of black adults incarcerated, because "the real crime is being poor." Structural barriers, she said, are as much a cause of poverty as individuals' life choices. Addressing those barriers, Harris-Perry added, requires political will. She also pointed out that a political coalition between blacks and middle-income whites would serve both groups, since those whites have more in common with blacks, economically speaking, than they do with higher-income whites. In addition, she set out to puncture myths, explaining, for example, that there is little demonstrated connection between poverty and the so-called marriage dearth, since the marriage rate has seen a steady drop while the poverty rate has been much more erratic.

On January 17 Nikki Johnson-Huston gave the final keynote, recalling her journey from homeless child to successful Philadelphia-based attorney. She told her spellbound audience that she had entered the shelter system at age nine, and that she had learned the importance of service from her grandmother, who had later taken care of Johnson-Huston when her own mother could not. Johnson-Huston described herself as "the legacy of [her] grandmother" and of "the social safety net." She recalled that during her

time in shelter, she loved to visit libraries—warm, comfortable places where books fed her imagination and her dreams. Johnson-Huston went on to college, and though she



Ralph da Costa Nunez



Melissa Harris-Perry

on the Homefront

struggled there, due to a low self-image from having been homeless, she later worked as a live-in nanny for a kind family who helped her to pursue her ambitions. Johnson-Huston's brother, she revealed, had not been as fortunate, having entered foster care because his grandmother could afford to take in only one child. The path her brother took as a result contributed to his early death. While grieving for him and carrying a burden of guilt, Johnson-Huston discovered a community of people who had greatly valued her brother, which led her to realize how much human life and potential are wasted when families are broken up because of poverty. She urged advocates and government officials to "please try to keep families together."

Conference breakout sessions included "Working to End Homelessness: Best and Promising Practices of Employment Interventions for People Experiencing Homelessness." In this session, Chris Warland and Caitlin Schnur of the Chicago-based National Transitional Jobs Network explained that employment is a significant determinant of health and that people need not be "100 percent employable" to begin working. For example, if an alcohol-dependent person can refrain from drinking while on the job, that person can be employed, even if he or she is not yet ready to stop consuming alcohol at other times. The philosophy behind transitional jobs, Warland and Schnur explained, is "meeting people where they are." Another session was titled "The Role of Emergency Housing in Promoting Stability and Sustained Recovery in a Housing-First World." During that session Elizabeth von Werne and Holly Woodbury of Miami's Chapman Partnership recalled the organization's founding by Alvah Chapman in the early 1990s, and they described its continuing, successful work in enlisting employers, local government, volunteers, and faith- and community-based organizations to provide an "ecosystem of support" for homeless individuals and families. A network of local organizations is also integral to the work of the COMPASS Community College Collaborative, a Massachusetts program that was the focus of another breakout session. Jodi Wilinsky Hill of COMPASS for Kids and Susan Leger Ferraro of Inspirational Ones, which serves disadvantaged youth, described their success in promot-

ing education and job-readiness training for parents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

In a departure for the Beyond Housing conference, on January 17 ICPH staff led separate, hour-long breakfast discussions, each devoted to a different question regarding poverty and homelessness. Conference attendees were free to participate in discussions of their choice.



Nikki Johnson-Huston

Deb Ellis, executive director of the New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness, and Jan Edgar Langbein and Jon Edmonds of the Dallas-based service provider Austin Street Center were among the participants in a discussion focusing on the questions, "With respect to national and local plans to end homelessness, what does the end of homelessness actually look like? What are the goals, and are they realistic?" The discussion yielded agreement that the "end of homelessness" would mean that all who wanted to access homeless services could do so, and that there would be no unsheltered homeless individuals or families. Ellis argued that ending homelessness could not be done solely by government and that communities must be involved, which led Edmonds to suggest the term "community first" as a slogan emphasizing the importance of shared responsibility for individuals, families, and neighborhoods. Another breakfast discussion centered on community experiences with rapid rehousing programs for families. Conference attendees from Nashville, Tennessee; Lowell, Massachusetts; Arlington, Texas; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Des Moines, Iowa, discussed the challenges of rapidly rehousing families in their respective communities as well as successes some had seen through that approach. Those finding fault with rapid rehousing noted that providers were often required to have significant liquid assets on hand to cover the lag time between rent payments to landlords and reimbursements to providers. They also expressed frustration with the shift in funding priorities in favor of rapid rehousing at the expense of transitional-housing providers. Proponents of the strategy felt that in their communities, rapid rehousing allowed providers to do more for their families with less money. Participants in the discussion agreed that under the right circumstances and with appropriate targeting of funding and case-management resources, rapid rehousing can work for some families.

Another special feature of the Beyond Housing conference was the exhibit on January 16 by the internationally published photographer Craig Blankenhorn. The photographs document the experiences of some of the 1.6 million homeless children in the U.S., in regions as disparate as Las Vegas, Florida, and New Jersey. Blankenhorn's often heartbreaking images depicted children of different races, all suffering the effects of housing instability. For conference attendees who saw the exhibit, the photographs were a poignant reminder of why they were gathered in New York City, and whom they had come together to serve.

—Clifford Thompson
and Elizabeth Ezratty

For videos, presentation footage, and additional information related to the Beyond Housing conference, see the ICPH Web site at www.ICPHusa.org.