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Reframing Homelessness in Vermont: A Systemic Approach to Homelessness Policy Advocacy in Windham County Vermont

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Reframing Homelessness in Vermont:
A Systemic Approach to Homelessness Policy Advocacy in Windham County Vermont

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PIM 73

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Sustainable Development at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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Abstract

The Changeworks Committee of the Groundworks Collaborative was created in 2014 to implement advocacy that would build public support for long-term policy changes addressing the root causes of homelessness in Windham County Vermont. This research focused on the work of this committee, and posed the question: How does reframing homelessness as a systemic issue instead of an individual issue impact the public perception of the problem in Windham County, Vermont? I argue that reframing perceptions of homelessness as the result of systemic failure and not as a problem of individual choice is key to building public support for solutions. Additionally, the work of the Changeworks Committee was analyzed through Shultz’s roadmap for policy, Unsicker’s policy circles, and Lakoff’s reframing model. My findings and analysis show the committee’s efforts have resulted in an increase in community collaboration, awareness of the root causes of homelessness, and the empowerment of those experiencing homelessness. Shifting away from the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” approach towards a systemic root cause approach has allowed for a deeper, more productive public discourse on how to implement solutions in the local area.
**Introduction**

On Friday night, January 29, 2016, there was found to be 120,819 children and 429,109 adults experiencing homelessness in the United States (US) (Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivji, 2016). The total number who have experienced homelessness at some point over the course of a year is estimated at 3 million (Mitchell, 2013). These numbers indicate that a structural flaw exists within the US economic system. Overcoming this systemic challenge has been a significant challenge for advocates and policy makers. Public policy is a critical factor in providing housing and other resources to assist the homeless.

This is why I chose to volunteer with the Changeworks committee of Groundworks Collaborative, who advocates for public policy changes for the homeless in Windham County Vermont (VT). As a member of the Changeworks policy advocacy committee, I have been part of a team that has been analyzing perceptions in Vermont and the US at large related to homelessness, hunger, and poverty. This team has also emphasized local solutions to these issues, and has been engaged in working towards these solutions. My focus has been on reframing the public perception around homelessness as a necessary step in shifting public policy towards ending homelessness.

Groundworks Collaborative is a non-profit service provider that assists those faced with unstable housing and food insecurity in the Brattleboro, VT area. This organization was formed in May of 2015 as a merger of Morningside Shelter and the Brattleboro Area Drop In Center. The main objective of the Changeworks committee is to perform policy advocacy activities for the Groundworks Collaborative. According to Unsicker (2013), policy advocacy is defined as, “the process by which people, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to enhance social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace by
influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions” (p. 4). The committee has focused on understanding the systemic causes of homelessness, educating the public, and building support for long-term policy changes.

Prior to the Changeworks committee, Morningside Shelter created a policy advocacy committee in the summer of 2014, which became the foundation for Changeworks. The committee is comprised of volunteers from the Groundworks Board of Directors, and community members in the Brattleboro area. One of the tasks of the Changeworks committee was to finalize a strategic plan in 2015, which would provide a roadmap for the committee’s work.

The strategic plan (Appendix A) laid out a number of key objectives for the group to execute over the course of a 3-year period. These include making the public aware of the newly merged organization, increasing public understanding of systemic causes of homelessness and poverty, and connecting with local, state and national agencies working towards improving the system for all. Another element of the plan was to build support for systems-based changes by increasing the organization’s network of allies.

One of the key strategic directions for the Changeworks committee was to change the conversation around the causes of homelessness. The conversation around homelessness and poverty in the United States has been dominated by a frame that assigns blame to individuals and their lack of motivation (Lakoff, 2006; Mitchell, 2013; Manuel and Kendall-Taylor 2016). This discourse has often ignored the systemic roots of homelessness, such as a socioeconomic system rife with the conditions that cause homelessness and poverty. To reframe the public’s perception of the root cause of homelessness from individual towards systemic, the committee conducts approximately four community conversations on homelessness and poverty per year.
This reframing empowers people in the community to take action. An integral part of the committee’s work is the input, participation, and leadership of current and former clients in the advocacy activities. They play a role in changing local, state, and national policies to reduce poverty in Windham County.

This course-linked capstone (CLC) will shed light on the systemic barriers in Vermont that prevent sustainable housing options. This work will attempt to connect to policy framing, policy research, and systemic approaches by asking the following questions:

- How does reframing homelessness as a systemic issue instead of an individual issue impact the public perception of the problem in Windham County Vermont?
- What has been the role of the Changeworks volunteer committee in shaping a policy advocacy movement in Windham County Vermont?

This paper will address the past events that helped to shape the current perceptions of homelessness, and delve into the products of the Changeworks committee, with an emphasis on the community meetings and public forums that took place between April 2015 and February 2017. I will analyze the policy advocacy work of the Changeworks committee through Shultz’s roadmap for policy (Shultz, 2002), Unsicker’s policy circles (Unsicker, 2013), and Lakoff’s reframing (Lakoff, 2006). I will argue that reframing perceptions of homelessness as the result of systemic failure and not as a problem of individual choice is key to building public support for solutions to the issue.

**Overview/Context**

**Historical Perspective of Homelessness**

Current perspectives of homelessness have been framed through neoliberal messaging and stresses individual choice. The view of individual blame has ignored larger systemic flaws
and has contributed to the marginalization of the poor on an individual and on a systemic level. Historically, the policies adopted by the US government have been influenced by these perspectives and have legitimized discrimination of the working and poor classes. Social and economic systems, industrialization, and gentrification have created the institutionalized form of homelessness that we see today.

An early contributor to the structural causes of homelessness in the US was the creation of vagrancy laws. During the time of post-Civil War industrialization, demand was created for labor that could move back and forth between rural areas and large cities (Mitchell, 2013). This resulted in a massive group of migratory men and women without permanent housing. The ruling class felt that their social status was threatened by this development. The fears of the upper class lead to the creation of vagrancy laws, which were brutal towards the wandering poor (Mitchell, 2013). Vagrancy laws penalized those “roaming from place to place without a permanent job, home, or material resources” (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Many of these laws have since been ruled invalid by courts due to being unconstitutionally vague (Legal Information Institute, n.d.).

The formation of a large migratory class of workers led to moral criticism from the privileged class. The encampments that were established on the outskirts of cities outraged the upper and middle classes. These “skid rows” became places for cheap shelter and for managing a large pool of mobile labor (Mitchell, 2013). Social science of the early 20th century explained this emerging vagrancy as a case of drifting men not interested in family life and as having a personality deficit or character flaw. This became a permanent class of poor, who were seen as not fitting in with the middle and upper class. These supposed character flaws were emphasized more than the mere fact that they did not have permanent homes (Mitchell, 2013). The negative
perceptions against this class of poor people became further ingrained following the World War II era.

The first national public housing program and the full-employment economy of the World War II era led to a shift in homelessness, where many members of the poor were brought into middle-class suburban communities. As Mitchell (2013) described, “Those labeled homeless in the postwar years were the residents of the remaining SROs [single room occupancy], missions, and lodging houses, and they tended to be white, elderly, and rarely transient. They were frequently alcoholic. They were either minimally employed or unemployable” (p. 939). Since opportunities for success were clear for most Americans, homelessness was seen as a result of a character flaw or bad choices.

A new wave of homelessness took hold during the Ronald Reagan administration in the early 1980’s, fueled by recessions, loss of industry, weakening unions, and cuts to public housing (Mitchell, 2013). As unemployment rose, work was “radically restructured in the years that followed, as the assault on unions, wage guarantees, basic welfare entitlements, and the public housing sector continued unabated” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 940). The homeless were now more visible, especially on the mains streets of business districts. They often did not fit the previous stereotypes of the white, elderly, alcoholic man. Homeless advocates addressed the issue through a greatly expanded shelter system. This expansion was funded by the McKinney-Vento Act of 1987, but did not address the systemic causes of homelessness (Mitchell, 2013).

Gentrification is one of those causes. Gentrification, also called urban regeneration, urban revitalization, or neighborhood renewal, is “used to refer to alterations in land use patterns and changes in the composition of the neighborhood populations that are resulting in new social organizational patterns in inner cities throughout the United States and other industrialized
Western nations” (Palen & London, 1984, p. 4). This is typically viewed as a pejorative term, as gentrification often leads to the dismantling of the way of life of low-income, long-term residents of a city. This occurs through increased rental costs, increased price of goods, and changing social norms that favor middle and upper class residents. Since the early 1980’s, gentrification has not only increased the number of homeless, but also made life more difficult for those experiencing homelessness by pushing them further away from downtown areas. American economic policy is one of the key drivers of gentrification.

Two ideologies make it difficult for advocates to garner support for the homeless; individualism and neoliberalism. Individualism says that people have chosen poverty and homelessness because they are lazy. This is exemplified by the bootstraps myth that permeates American culture. This myth assumes that individuals have complete agency over their circumstances and that housing is a matter of choice (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor 2016). It stigmatizes those who find themselves struggling with homelessness. Those in poverty end up being pressured to move, told to avoid housing beyond their means, “and chastised for making ‘bad choices’—in much the same way that someone might be chastised for buying too many shoes or expensive purses” (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor 2016, p. 6). The other ideology, neoliberalism, emphasizes freedom of choice reduced regulation and personal responsibility. The personal responsibility and welfare reform of the Clinton presidency demanded adherence to certain rules to delineate the deserving poor from the undeserving poor. The deserving poor were seen as people who worked hard and deserved housing, but were poor due to low-wage jobs. The undeserving poor were seen as attempting to live off of the system, and often viewed as deserving punishment (Mitchell, 2013).

Gowan (2010) identified three different ideologies used to explain homelessness: sin,
sickness, and systems. Within the public sphere, there is a dominant view that homelessness is intentional and based upon personal choice. In this model, individual blame is broken into the categories of either sickness or sin. The system view, on the other hand, assigns the root cause of homelessness to the economic system (Gowan, 2010).

These different views about the origins of homelessness also lead to different prescriptions for what to do about it. Viewing sin as the root cause often justifies the criminalization of homelessness. This sin concept also can permeate into the thinking of homeless people themselves, where one believes that it was merely their personal mistakes that led them to homelessness. The sickness explanation is used to move the homeless out of public view and into the shelter system (Gowan, 2010). The system explanation, the explanation pushed by advocates, emphasizes social justice, a movement to increase economic and power equity.

**Structural Causes of Homelessness**

Different perspectives on homelessness are not equally valid. We cannot accurately explain homelessness as laziness, sickness, or immorality on the part of those in poverty. Structural causes of homelessness must be addressed. These include the shortage of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment, inadequate mental health services, and an inadequate welfare system (Johnson, 1994). The overarching system that creates these structural causes is the neoliberal capitalist form of economy in the US.

Homelessness is rooted in poverty. Poverty is rooted in inequality, which is a prominent feature of modern capitalism. Over the last sixty years, productivity in the US, in terms of gross national product, has steadily climbed. The United States has the largest economy in the world. Major companies are doing well and CEO compensation is at an all-time high (Paton, 2014). From 1948 to 1973, worker productivity grew by 97%, with wages increasing by 94% (Smith,
From 1973 to 2011, productivity grew by 80%, but wages increased by just 10% (Smith, 2012). Owners and executives have reaped the benefits of economic growth in the US, and the working class has been left behind.

Here in Vermont, as in some other parts of the country, efforts are underway to bridge this widening inequality gap by increasing the minimum wage to $9.60 per hour. Unfortunately, according to Glasmeier (2017), the livable wage is $24.04 per hour in Windham County, which has risen from $19.41 in 2015. This is the amount individuals must earn to support their family, if they are the sole provider, are working full-time, live in fair market housing, and have one child (Glasmeier, 2017). Windham County has the third highest livable wage in the state, despite not being located near a metropolitan area (Yentel et al., 2016). If this great disparity remains between wages and what it costs to maintain stable housing, Vermont is going to continue to see poverty and homelessness in the community. Since this disparity has been rising sharply in Vermont, it is likely that the conditions will get worse.

The housing prices in Windham County are based on its very low vacancy rate of only 0.5% for apartments in multifamily buildings. For apartments at market value, the vacancy rate drops down to 0.00%. The rental vacancy rate in healthy and stable markets is estimated to be 4 to 6% (Bowen National Research, 2015). Combining the low vacancy rate with the large wage gap, the systemic foundation for homelessness is in place. Based on the 2014 Point-In-Time Survey, Windham County had 170 homeless, which was a 35% increase from the 126 that were homeless in 2013 (Peters, 2015). This represents the second highest number of homeless individuals for any county in Vermont, and it has little to do with personal choices or qualities.

The current system in Windham County utilizes a crisis response when assisting those who have lost their housing, either putting them in a motel or a shelter. The most expensive thing
that we can to do is put a person experiencing homelessness in a motel, approximately $60 per night in Windham County. The next most expensive thing to do is to put them into a shelter, approximately $35 per night in Windham County. A less expensive option is providing an apartment and support services, approximately $27 per night. Often, all the assistance the individual may need is help in paying whatever back rent they have had trouble paying off, which would keep them in stable housing. The use of more expensive stopgap solutions instead of long-term solutions has been driven by individualism and neoliberalism. The American emphasis on individual responsibility hinders preventative solutions, where either the government or a social service organization would pay someone’s rent for them. The current crisis-based policies are less cost-effective than the preventative or the long-term solutions, and contribute to the structural causes of homelessness.

**Homelessness Policy**

Little progress has been made towards ending homelessness via policy changes over the past twenty years. It is “a chronic, not a crisis or emergency, condition; it is an inevitable feature of American-style capitalism, even if it might grow during times of economic downturn” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 950). Homelessness policy has not addressed the low availability of affordable housing throughout the country and has likely not reduced the challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness (Mitchell, 2013). Federal policy, mainly the McKinney-Vento act, has not addressed other underlying causes, such as poverty and disabilities (Johnson, 1994). Debates about acceptable uses of public space have created fear and anxiety among those who own property, making the situation even more tenuous for the homeless.

Homelessness has merely been moved to different locations, determined generally by the business and property owning class. There is a visible type of homelessness, where people are
seen living in the streets or in tents. There are also the less visible groups who are either living in shelters or transitional housing, living in their cars, or couch surfing with friends or family. The total numbers of homeless are determined through the changes in labor markets, the reductions in welfare supports, and the reduction in the stock of low-cost and public housing options. Housing options available to the homeless have been reduced through lack of investment, gentrification, and the US embracing neoliberal market-based solutions to housing (Mitchell, 2013).

In the past, the welfare state provided some basic aid as a right to those in need, but that has been replaced with a patchwork and charity model that is utterly insufficient to the task of ending homelessness. The existence of emergency shelters, designed for crisis, could be used as a general institutionalized solution to homelessness. Unfortunately, the shelter system is not a replacement for the publicly funded, long-term support that is required for the most vulnerable populations. “Access to affordable housing, adequate incomes to meet basic needs, and support services for people with disabilities, is the only real answer” (Johnson, 1994, p. 161).

The mere presence of the homeless in downtown areas has created obstacles for those in poverty. Business owners often use their power and influence to maintain a geographic divide between the rich and the poor (Mitchell, 2013). Businesses and community members often organize and fight to keep homeless shelters out of their “backyards.” The McKinney-Vento Act and a variety of judicial and community actions that preserved the rights of people living on the streets were countered with strong opposition. A campaign was waged by conservatives to demonize homelessness by reframing it as a problem of public order, not as an effect of economic restructuring and capitalism (Mitchell, 2013).

Those targeted as the undeserving poor and the homeless now face increased punishment from a legal system that features anti-homelessness laws, stricter no-trespassing laws, restrictions
on general assistance paid to the homeless, and laws that reduce the ability of the homeless to be
zoning laws, use-permit systems, and negotiations with NIMBY activists to confine the
warehousing and containment of homeless people in specific areas of the city” (p. 950). The
current policy landscape clearly favors business and property owners, creates tremendous
barriers to those experiencing homelessness, and has forced more and more people out of the
sight of the public.

**Solutions to Homelessness in the US: The Housing First Model**

Recently proposed interventions into homelessness such as Housing First, Permanent
Supportive Housing (PSH), and Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) have the potential to change the
structure of homeless support services in the US. The Housing First approach is the umbrella
under which PSH and RRH fall.

The Housing First Model provides permanent housing as the first step in assisting the
homeless in other areas. With a home it is easier for people to work on their personal goals and
address their own challenges. As the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) (2016)
described, “This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and
a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly,
or attending to substance use issues” (p. 1). The Housing First model allows for client choice in
housing and in supportive services, which in theory increases the likelihood that the participant
will be able to retain housing. This model provides flexibility to participants. They are not
mandated to seek services for their challenges all at once. Rather, they have the choice of
working on health or behavioral health problems, life improvements, finances, or other things.
One of the programs of Housing First is Rapid Re-housing, which can be used with a wide range of individuals and families. RRH focuses on homelessness prevention by providing short-term rental assistance and services (NAEH, 2016). This program looks to help people maintain their housing, be self-sufficient, or to obtain housing quickly if not housed (NAEH, 2016).

The other program of Housing First is Permanent Supportive Housing. It is a model for people who have experienced long-term homelessness and have chronic illnesses, chronic mental illnesses, substance use disorders, or disabilities (NAEH, 2016). PSH targets populations that are experiencing chronic homelessness. HUD defines chronic homelessness as when an individual has been homeless for at least one year or more, or has experienced homelessness at least four times in the past three years (2015). According to Byrne T., Fargo J., Montgomery, A., Munley, E., & Culhane, D. (2014), people experiencing chronic homelessness are highly vulnerable, have complex needs, and the fact that they are homeless results in great costs to society. PSH is subsidized housing that comes with continuing supportive services. As Byrne et al. (2014) mentioned, “The underlying theory is that the residential stability provided by permanent housing is essential to clients’ success in all dimensions of their lives” (p. 235). Studies have shown PSH has led to a reduction in the use of more expensive public services such as healthcare systems, mental health treatment, shelters, and the criminal justice system, with over 80% of clients retaining their housing for at least two years (Byrne et al., 2014).

In 2005, the state of Utah setup a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness using the Housing First Model, which included both RRH and PSH. According to the state’s data, chronic homelessness has been reduced by 91% (Hartvigsen et al., 2015). The validity of this statistic has been thrown into question however, as it may reflect changes that Utah made to how it counts the
number of chronically homeless. From 2005 through 2009, individuals living in long-term shelters were classified as chronically homeless, but that was not true from 2010 through 2015 (Corinth, 2016). Despite the debate over the exact numbers for Utah, the Housing First Model has been shown to be effective for getting the chronically homeless into housing, and for having greater access to supportive services (Hartvigsen et al., 2015).

Mitchell (2013) however does not see the Housing First Model as a long-term solution to the issue of homelessness,

Housing policy for the past 40 years in the United States has consisted of underfunding and eliminating public housing, subsidizing middle- and upper-class homeownership through tax policy, and encouraging staggering debt, both credit card and mortgage, for lower-income families so that home ownership could ‘filter down’ to them. (p. 949)

Housing First is based on a publicly-financed model and does not change the fact that market-rate housing leaves many people out. Housing First is only a part of the solution. A long-term, structural solution would address the deficiencies of capitalism that result in homelessness and poverty. It will also address policies based on the idea that homelessness is the result of individual failings.

**Homelessness Approaches, Solutions and Policy in VT**

The gap between the minimum wage and the livable wage in Vermont makes housing policy an important issue. According to Yentel et al. (2016) from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIH), a minimum wage worker in Vermont would need to work 69 hours per week to afford fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment. In order to afford a two-bedroom unit, the number goes up to 88 hours per week. Vermont ranks as the 13th most expensive state in the US for two-bedroom housing relative to the state’s minimum wage. The
state ranks second for the number of full-time jobs one would need to work, at the mean renter wage, to afford a two-bedroom unit—1.8 jobs. Only Hawaii has a higher burden on mean wage workers at 2.4 full-time jobs needed (Yentel et al., 2016). Within this context, Vermont has significant hurdles to overcome.

To face this challenge, the Vermont Roadmap to End Homelessness was created by a steering committee of state and non-profit agencies. The committee released a report in December 2016 detailing five action steps that can be taken to end homelessness in the state. These are as follows:

1. Scale supportive housing in Vermont.
2. Complete the design and rollout of Vermont’s coordinated entry system.
3. Increase the supply of affordable rental housing.
5. Design and test new innovative programs. (CSH, 2016, p.14-16)

Vermont is part of a movement towards ending homelessness, as the state has put together effective and coordinated state-level support for communities.

Across the state, there is a core of committed, well-run non-profit organizations working on solutions. Best practices, such as PSH and RRH, have begun to be used throughout most of the state, though on a limited basis. This is evident in the strong level of collaboration that has taken place among various service provider groups at the local, state, and federal levels, along with the philanthropic community. This collaboration has resulted in “a number of highly effective and sustained partnerships that have moved the dial on homelessness” (CSH, 2016, p. 7). The typical approach in Vermont is to emphasize solving problems locally. The local approach combined with state-level flexibility has allowed for innovation in the various
homelessness programs around the state (CSH, 2016).

Policy changes are needed to address the lack of affordable housing in the state, which include the need for a wider implementation of PSH and RRH. The vacancy rate of only 2-3% for the state creates a steep challenge for those experiencing homelessness and the organizations trying to support them (CSH, 2016). The coordinated entry system has recently been introduced throughout the state, and it has the potential to increase the efficiency of public resources through prioritizing the highest-need cases of homelessness (CSH, 2016). A coordinated entry system is designed to effectively distribute homeless services regardless of location. This system allows for prioritization of assistance based on severity of needs (US Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2015). Coordinated entry is intended to reduce the geographical barriers that exist in Vermont, by allowing clients to be referred to services regardless of which service agency they contact first.

A variety of barriers to ending homelessness still exist in Vermont. Most significantly is the lack of affordable housing and PSH. There is also a lack of financial resources for rental subsidies, which reduces the ability to have an effective rapid rehousing program and homelessness prevention program. The costs associated with long-term supportive services make prospective policy changes less sustainable. Another challenge is getting the coordinated entry system fully functional throughout the state. Due to the lack of affordable housing and of available emergency shelter beds, there is too much reliance on the motel voucher system. There is a lack of affordable transportation due to the rural nature of the state (CSH, 2016). Overcoming these challenges will require innovative approaches including the reframing of the causes of homelessness.
Collective Impact

Collective impact is a way of organizing that frequently came up during my work with the Changeworks committee. Essentially it is akin to coalition building, but with particular focus on collaboration from a diverse assortment of influential people. According to Kania and Kramer (2011), collective impact is the “commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p. 36). Solving a social issue as widespread and complex as homelessness is no easy task, and applying the collective impact approach to it requires a coordinated effort more far-reaching than previous work in Windham County.

Kania and Kramer (2011) cite five conditions for a successful collective impact intervention: (1) There needs to be a mutually agreed upon agenda for the organizations involved. (2) The actors should utilize a common set of measurement systems to ensure alignment and accountability. (3) The activities of each stakeholder should be mutually reinforcing and be based upon the strengths of each organization. (4) There should be continuous, long-term communication using shared vocabulary and tools that allow the groups to build trust in each other. (5) There should be a backbone organization that has dedicated staff to manage and facilitate the initiative (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Due to the potential benefits of this approach, the organizations in the Brattleboro area have considered this collective impact model as a way to implement solutions to the issue of homelessness. To this point, there has been a lack of a funded backbone organization to implement this strategy with fidelity, but the model was frequently discussed on the Changeworks committee.
Concepts and Theory

The major concepts and theories that informed the work of the Changeworks committee were framing of issues, the roadmap for policy advocacy, and policy circles model. The framing work of George Lakoff was utilized to create messaging that situated homelessness as a systemic issue. The roadmap of Shultz informed the creation of the committee’s strategic plan and implementation of the public forums. Unsicker’s policy circles provided clarity on the main goals of the committee and increased our understanding of the advocates, allies, and opponents involved in our work.

Framing of Issues

Lakoff (2006) discusses the importance of framing issues in American politics in his book *Thinking Points*. Framing refers to the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue in order to cue a specific response. Lakoff (2006) has shown the way a problem is framed explains the responsible party, and implies the best solutions through imagery, stereotypes, messengers, and metaphors (Lakoff, 2006). The dominant frame of how the American people think about poverty in general cues a response that the individual is at fault, which then informs policies and the design of assistance programs.

The approach taken by those on the right of the political spectrum varies from those on the left. Lakoff (2006) observes that, “conservatives seem to argue on the basis of direct, individual causation, while progressives tend to argue on the basis of systemic, complex causation” (p. 62). Liberals understand the complex factors involved, where “educational disadvantages, cultural biases, the vestiges of racism, entrenched institutions, as well as some government policies are all seen as contributing to entrenched poverty” (Lakoff, 2006, p. 62-63). Those on the left side of the political spectrum tend to see the growing level of income inequality
in the US as a serious problem to be addressed. In regard to poverty, those on the right place direct blame on the poor themselves. The right sees prosperity as available to those that have the motivation, discipline and morals to achieve it. Conservatives frame the issue in a way that says, “the poor are by definition lazy and immoral—simply not willing to lift themselves by their bootstraps” (Lakoff, 2006, p. 62). The bootstraps myth implies that it is easy for one to improve their economic situation in life. This is the frame that is most commonly espoused in American discourse. The right views this as a product of the self-correcting free market, where intervention is not desired. This resistance to intervention needs to be overcome in order to create solutions to poverty and homelessness.

**Challenges of Framing Homelessness**

Much work is to be done towards creating messages that promote solutions to housing issues that will resonate with the public. It is not easy to convince public audiences that homelessness and affordable housing are major concerns, as the public, may not have time to listen to all of the facts and data we have to offer; are concerned that their housing values may go down if “affordable housing” is located nearby; and are not won over by the sad stories we have to tell about the growing number of individuals who are facing impossible housing constraints. (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor 2016)

Charts, data, and figures are not likely to make people connect deeply to issues of housing as a shared public issue. Understanding why the current messaging is failing may be a path towards finding messages that will connect to the public.

The bootstraps myth is a hurdle for those advocating for the homeless. As advocates bring messages about affordability issues to the public, the bootstraps myth is a simple frame that opponents use to dismiss the real problems that people face. The myth also suggests a quick and
easy solution, which is for those struggling to simply move away to where there are more jobs available. The quick and easy solution is not the intended meaning that advocates are trying to invoke among the public when discussing affordable housing. The unintended consequence is that the mere mention of the bootstraps myth makes the public think that the only action required is for those in poverty to make better decisions, be more resourceful, and to take the initiative to move away (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor 2016). The public does not see a need for policy or systemic change when operating from this frame.

A key actor in framing issues of poverty and homelessness is the media. Media messaging can often reinforce the bootstraps myth and an individualistic frame. Media accounts of homelessness also rarely include a historical perspective. “Many U.S. news accounts of homelessness relate to natural disasters or attribute it to bad luck, with systemic forces, government policies, or economic trends rarely cited as having a causal influence” (Calder, Richter, Kovacs Burns, & Mao, 2011, p. 10).

Presenting the issues involved in solving housing problems and poverty to the public in a way that increases their understanding of the topic is a challenge. Activists and advocates need to be clear when presenting complex issues to the public in order to prevent the unintended consequence of reinforcing the individualistic frame. Explanations to the public need to be provided in ways that are more accessible and clear in order to address the lack of understanding of complex issues (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor 2016). In order to gain support for improved homelessness policies, infrastructure, and programs, advocates must create clear messaging that explains systemic causation in a way that brings better understanding among the public.

**Data Collection Methods**

This research was conducted as a Policy Advocacy CLC concerning the work I did as co-
chair of the Changeworks committee. I helped to organize and track the planning and actions related to the strategic plan to end homelessness, between August 2014 and February 2017. I will provide details and analyze the work of this committee, which includes an infographic, public forums and meetings, a survey, a multimedia exhibit, and a radio ad. These sources form the basis of my research and analysis, and will be examined within the frameworks of Shultz’s roadmap for policy advocacy, Unsicker’s policy circles model, and Lakoff’s framing model.

I transcribed the content from a community television interview on January 8, 2015, called Conversations Vermont - Homelessness: Myths, Gaps, Successes with the directors of the Groundworks Collaborative, Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA), and Our Place Drop-In Center. These are three of the key social service organizations supporting individuals and families experiencing homelessness. My observations from the interview allowed the gleaning of key information, which helped to create reframing messages for the policy advocacy committee. These observations were used to plan the next steps in the committee’s outreach.

As part of my work with the Changeworks committee, we conducted a survey (Appendix D) in order to gain insights on the general public’s views on homelessness and their willingness to take action on the issue. The survey included three questions about homelessness, one question about a series of forums organized by Changeworks, and another question about volunteering. There were a total of 39 respondents to the survey. After conducting the survey, I coded the themes that came out of the responses to the question on the causes of homelessness in Brattleboro and the question on solutions to homelessness.

I conducted both primary document analysis of the infographic, the notes I took from the two years of meetings, and the transcript of the radio ad I recorded. I made personal reflections
on the full scope of the work of the committee. I conducted secondary document analysis of the local and statewide literature related to the local conditions of housing and poverty. I also conducted secondary document analysis of the relevant literature on reframing homelessness and policy advocacy.

To determine the role of the Changeworks volunteer committee in shaping a policy advocacy movement in Windham County, this research will simply look at what the committee has done and what were the results. I will pay particular attention to efforts to reframe the issue of homelessness, away from an individualistic frame and towards a systemic frame, and analyze the successes and shortcomings of those reframing efforts.

**Findings and Products**

**Overview**

*Figure 2: Milestones for Products of the Changeworks Committee*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUG to NOV 2014</td>
<td>Formation of Morningside Policy Advocacy Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEB 2015</td>
<td>Creation of Housing in Windham County: Do the Math infographic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APR 2015</td>
<td>Two community meetings on homelessness held at The Works Bakery and Café.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY to JUL 2015</td>
<td>Formation of Changeworks Committee and development of strategic plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOV 2015</td>
<td>Homelessness Myths &amp; Realities Forum at First Baptist Church. Infographic distributed and survey administered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEC 2015</td>
<td>Coffee &amp; Conversations multimedia exhibit and spoken word events at River Garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUL 2016</td>
<td>Radio Ad recorded and began airing on WKVT radio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEB 2017</td>
<td>Spaces Forum at River Garden.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The main strategy of the Changeworks committee was to shift the debate about the cause of homelessness from an individual choice frame towards a systemic frame. In order to accomplish this, the committee helped to organize public forums, formulated a strategic plan, designed a survey, and promoted the work in the media. The initial incarnation of the committee, when it was called the Morningside Shelter Policy Advocacy Committee, looked specifically at educating the board of directors for the Morningside Shelter on advocacy, policy change, and issues of equity. The committee sought to frame the tremendous need in the county around housing and food. Early discussions focused on how to get people to think about these problems as priorities. Two paths towards accomplishing this included sharing key data points such as the Point In Time Counts and sharing personal stories. Point In Time Counts are conducted each January in Vermont to determine the number of people who are homeless on one particular night. The reframing stressed the message that the community is better off when everyone is able to attain life’s basic needs.

As a volunteer committee, the idea was to put together a group of people who would not get caught up in the daily administration of social services at the shelter, and would therefore be able to focus on creating broader messaging and policy objectives via media, political networking, and connecting with businesses. The scope of the committee was limited to local and state work, as federal-level advocacy was beyond its capacity. As the committee began discussing priorities, livable wage, Housing First, and the availability of affordable housing rose to the top. Some of the values espoused by the committee included human rights, equity, transparency, accountability, universality, and participation.

The approaches that were inspirations for the work of the committee at that time included Housing First, Rapid Rehousing, and Universal Healthcare. These were seen as movements that
could help build momentum for policy advocacy. The Housing First model for the chronically homeless was seen as an innovative, logical approach coming out of framing the problem as systemic instead of poor individual choice.

The infographic titled “Housing in Windham County: Do the Math” (Appendix C) was generated following research into the issues surrounding homelessness in Windham County. I designed this infographic to highlight the lack of market rate housing available in Windham County by making a side-by-side comparison of the livable wage and the minimum wage. Copies of the infographic were passed out during the public forum at the First Baptist Church in November 2015.

In 2015 Morningside Shelter Policy Advocacy Committee became the Changeworks committee following the merger of Morningside Shelter and the Brattleboro Area Drop-in Center into the Groundworks Collaborative (GWC). The GWC leadership team created a rough draft for what would become the strategic plan of the Changeworks committee. The plan was then given to the Changeworks committee for deliberation and completion. During the review of the plan, the committee stressed using a systemic approach to advocacy. The main advocacy roles of the committee were making advocacy recommendations to the board and acting on the advocacy needs of the organization.

In March of 2015, the owner of The Works Bakery, Richard French, assembled approximately 8 town leaders to discuss what could be done about homelessness in Brattleboro. This led to two public forums at The Works Bakery in April of 2015. Members of the Changeworks committee facilitated these discussions. These forums were conducted using the World Café model.
The committee reached out to key decision makers in the community to ensure representation from municipal government, local affordable housing organizations, advocates, clients, media, business owners, and law enforcement. We asked ourselves if business would be ready to accept and implement a systemic approach to solving homelessness, as opposed to simply creating a short-term solution. Our belief was that creating a community-wide effort to solve the issue would have a long-term impact.

Two community discussions occurred, one on April 5th another on April 30th. The approach was based on the Collective Impact model. The hope was that the meeting would help keep the community engaged and build momentum for implementing solutions. The World Café format allowed for breakout groups with different areas of concern around homelessness. Each group had a facilitator and note taker, and participants had the opportunity to switch groups after about 20 minutes. Sign-up sheets were passed out for those who wanted to continue to be involved.

Following the community discussions, the committee decided to begin planning public forums that would provide a format to expand upon the themes that arose. There were three forums: “Myths & Realities of Homelessness,” “The Power of Collaboration: What do you need? What can you offer?” and “Spaces: A Community Conversation on Homelessness.” This series of public conversations and forums on homelessness conducted in Brattleboro were covered extensively in both local newspapers, The Reformer and The Commons, as well as on Brattleboro Community Television.

Changeworks also supported and promoted the “Coffee and Conversations” exhibit at the River Garden in Brattleboro on December 4 and 5, 2015. The exhibit was made up of photos, videos, and audio of two people sitting down together and connecting over a cup of coffee; one
person homeless, the other not. The exhibit also included a community art wall installation, which included artwork by those without stable housing. This was followed by a story slam at the River Garden about the exhibit and the experience of homelessness. This exhibit was designed to demonstrate the power of creating connections between those who are housed and those who are not. This was also a chance for the Changeworks committee to bring its messaging to the art community in Windham County.

Finally, I recorded a radio ad from 2016 discussing how listeners could support the Groundworks Collaborative on WKVT. Three other members of the committee recorded similar radio ads in order to gain public support for the work. This public service announcement was recorded and began airing on July 25, 2016. In August 2016, I went on live air during the Load the Latchis fundraising event.

Collectively, these actions represent over two years of planning and are the contributions of the Changeworks committee to homelessness advocacy in Windham County Vermont. Below is a discussion of the results of this work, organized around different events and milestones.

*Formation of Morningside Advocacy Committee*

The committee formed with a discussion that examined the dominant frame about the causes of homelessness (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Characteristics of the Dominant Frame for Homelessness Root Causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Needy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paternalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal irresponsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The themes listed in Table 1 became a list of the language the committee used to identify framing that triggered thoughts of individual blame. We discussed how this dominant frame reinforced the bootstraps myth and emphasized the Puritan work ethic of New England, where the divine influences the outcome. We asked ourselves, “Does the dominant frame work for people? How do people feel about this frame?” We desired to implement messaging that steered away from the use of this framing.

The committee then discussed the characteristics of what the desired frame would be for a systemic solution to homelessness. This resulted in a number of desired themes for framing (See Table 2).

Table 2: Characteristics of the Changeworks Committee’s Frame for a Systemic Solution to Homelessness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy &amp; compassion</th>
<th>Strengths-based approach</th>
<th>Continuous improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interconnectedness of the community</td>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Mobilize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investing in the disenfranchised</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Systemic change (the system works really well for some)</td>
<td>Long-term view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths-based approach</td>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human Rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list of themes in Table 2 identifies the language that the committee used to stress systemic methods. The committee’s approach was to invoke a systemic frame among the general public,
which could lead to a desire to utilize structural solutions to address the issue. We identified the Housing First model as an appropriate systemic response to chronic homelessness. Moving towards providing people housing instead of putting them into shelters is a needed shift.

When the committee first came together, we were very intentional about having a long-term vision for the work, with an emphasis on the larger systemic issues creating homelessness. By having a majority-volunteer committee, designated to look at the broader picture and not get distracted by the minutiae of providing daily social services, we were able to focus our efforts on framing the problem and considering potential policy changes. By mapping out the dominant frame and our desired frame, we had agreed upon language that could be used in public discourse on the subject.

*Two Community Meetings at The Works Bakery and Café*

The two community meetings at The Works Bakery and Café gave the committee its first chance to hear what people in the community think about homelessness and poverty. This also provided a chance to broadcast the systemic frame to a large audience. A tremendous number of ideas were generated and the community began to mobilize around the issue. During the 2 meetings, over 100 people signed up to stay informed.

The first discussion had approximately 130 people in attendance, and included the following breakout groups: Root Causes, Day Shelter, Housing, Treating People Equally, Support Services, Community Kitchen, and Jobs. One breakout group focused on the root causes of homelessness. This group identified one cause as “a competitive economic system that requires a portion of the population to remain poor. Social mores such as demonizing those living in poverty also contribute to homelessness” (Peters, 2015, April 8, p. A1). The group spoke about the influence of the public’s perceptions of poverty. They suggested analyzing why
poverty exists and then using that information to educate society about the systemic root causes. The group concluded that providing this information would help shift the mindset of how society views poverty.

Another breakout group said that the community does not welcome people who are using public spaces equally, as those who are homeless are treated as not belonging (Peters, April 8, 2015). This also led to discussion on what is public space versus what is private space and how to determine who can be in which spaces. This group brought up a town ordinance that does not allow camping in public spaces. Having an ordinance like this frames the circumstance of being homeless as something that is not allowed in society, and pushes people further into the shadows.

Another breakout group discussed affordable housing, and said that Housing First models have had success. This group also noted that the economic system emphasizes profit over services for people, which makes funding for Housing First programs a major hurdle (Peters, 2015, April 8). One suggestion was to tax homeowners to create funding for affordable housing. The group also said that the homeless should not be criminalized for actions meant to meet basic human needs such as shelter. This is related to a Brattleboro town ordinance that prohibits camping in public spaces.

Another breakout group discussed stigma against homelessness. They said that homeless people are not even considered members of the community by many. This group reported how little difference there can be between the homeless and those with homes; that most people in the area are only one or two paychecks away from being homeless themselves, which means there should not be such a divide. Another breakout group suggested creating public events where people experiencing homelessness could share their stories with their neighbors.
Approximately 100 people attended the second community discussion at The Works. The world café breakout groups were: Jobs, Housing First and Affordable Housing, Day Shelter, Root Causes, Supportive Services, Food, Municipal Involvement, and Treating People as People. One of the themes of the event was that homelessness encompasses a wide spectrum of needs, which, in turn, creates challenges for the community as a whole. The Municipal Involvement group said that homelessness is not a police issue but a community challenge. The group talked about the ramifications of the town’s no camping ordinance. Homelessness need not be criminalized; and the police, who regularly engage with the homeless, can facilitate connecting people to resources, such as the mental health social worker at the police department. The group also discussed having a long-term partnership between local government and the community.

The Housing First breakout group reported that there were 31 formerly homeless citizens in the town in 2015 that had affordable housing via vouchers. They noted that the major obstacle was that the two local affordable housing organizations had 600 apartments, but had a vacancy rate of less than 1%. They said that there is a need to push legislators to study and support the Housing First model and to create more affordable housing. They said that promising methods include permanent supportive housing and building tiny homes.

The Root Causes group discussed capitalism and whether or not poverty is necessary for capitalism to function. They mentioned racism, addiction, veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and incarceration as factors contributing to poverty and homelessness. The group posed the question: “What is the world you wish to live in and see?” They discussed the challenge for the Brattleboro area to provide needed services for people within the financial capacity of the community. They also mentioned trainings on social justice for communities and
local governments. A suggested next step was to have The Commons newspaper host a “Voices Live!” panel discussion on homelessness.

These two discussions were effective ways to engage the community. The World Café approach was used for discussing a variety of relevant topics including root causes, a discussion that encouraged people to engage in more systemic analysis of the problem. The meeting also established a current baseline of the situation in the area, and a space to brainstorm potential solutions. Because of the deep level of interest from many stakeholders, we considered utilizing a collective impact approach that drew on collaboration from many community leaders.

The second meeting resulted in an early draft of an advocacy plan for the Changeworks committee. There was also a stress on self-advocacy among those experiencing homelessness, where they could tell their powerful stories in the public arena. This brought greater depth to the public’s understanding of the large-scale, systemic problems that often result in homelessness. Local public officials were present and set the scene for further collaboration with social service organizations. The work of the Changeworks committee was cast in the light of an “action tank” instead of a “think tank,” where advocacy efforts would support both direct service and shifting public perceptions.

*Formation of Changeworks Committee from the Morningside Advocacy Committee*

Following the community discussions at The Works Bakery Café, the Morningside Shelter and Brattleboro Area Drop In Center publicly announced their merger into the Groundworks Collaborative in May of 2015. This merger resulted in the Morningside Advocacy Committee becoming the Changeworks Committee. Accompanying this committee, we updated our goals to include:
• Promoting self-advocacy for individual change while advocating for broader social change
• Increasing the public profile of the organization through advocacy
• Fostering greater community understanding and empathy around homelessness
• Engaging officials to change the system
• Expanding the number of allies working towards systemic change
• Creating space and opportunity for clients to participate in and lead advocacy efforts
• Planning advocacy work on an annual basis
• Conducting public dialogues on homelessness on a quarterly basis

The committee discussed taking a stronger role in the community’s response towards ending homelessness, which included possibly becoming the backbone organization for housing within the collective impact model. The committee made a commitment to continue providing a platform for the public to discuss these issues while focusing on systemic root causes for homelessness as well as food insecurity. These discussions led to the creation of the committee’s strategic plan (Appendix C). The plan included a series of benchmarks, such as fostering greater community understanding and expanding a network of allies working toward systemic change.

I pushed for language in the strategic plan that emphasized not simply including those who have experienced homelessness in our work, but having them lead the efforts with us. I believe this paid off, as several former clients would become members of the committee. All three of the forums organized by the Changeworks committee had at least one former client on the panel, sharing their stories and ideas with key community decision makers and the wider audience.
The committee achieved several expected benchmarks. We raised the public profile of GWC, broadcasted messages about the systemic causes of homelessness, and facilitated quarterly conversations on root causes. There has been progress on expanding allies and having clients lead advocacy efforts, but there is much work still to be done in these areas. A benchmark that has not been reached is the creation of an annual advocacy plan. This would allow the committee to create more effective messaging and work towards more specific, achievable policy goals.

*Housing in Windham County: Do the Math Infographic*

We created the Housing in Windham County: Do the Math infographic (Appendix A) as a tool for discussions within the policy advocacy committee around the lack of available housing in Windham County along with the gap between the livable wage and the minimum wage. This graphic was shared at the November 2015 community forum on the myths & realities of homelessness. A question and answer period gave the audience a chance to express their thoughts on related issues.

An audience member at the forum commented,

[I want to add] the importance of the federal government to do something about minimum wage. If we had people earning a livable wage, it would solve a large part of our housing problems. When people earn a livable wage, it becomes feasible for a builder to build decent rental housing and rent it at a profitable rate because people will be able to pay the rent. Without a livable wage, there’s so much we can’t do. (Peters, December 9, 2015, p. E1)

This indicates that participants were engaging with the content of the infographic, and seeing the interconnections between housing, wages, and the economic system.
The infographic on housing was my first attempt to create an infographic. It could have been improved by bringing in a professional graphic designer, but the committee had very limited resource. The distribution of this graphic at the Homelessness Myths & Realities forum proved to be an effective tactic, as it generated both public questions and side conversations about the systemic root causes of homelessness in Windham County. This discussion garnered coverage in local newspapers and community television. The message of this infographic could have been developed into a multimedia campaign, utilizing social media, public posters, radio, television, and newspapers. Therefore, there is unrealized potential for getting this message to a wider audience.

*Homelessness Myths & Realities Forum at First Baptist Church.*

The survey from the Myths & Realities of Homelessness forum shed light on the views of the community on homelessness. When asked, “Is homelessness an important problem in our community? Please rate from 1 to 10,” the average response was 8.3, with a high of 10 and a low of 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number (N=39)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing Costs and Lack of Affordable Housing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low wages and high cost of living</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic decline and lack of jobs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues, addiction, and mental health</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of services, insufficient safety net, and benefits cliff</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through coding the survey results for Question #2, five major themes came through. More than half of the respondents wrote that housing, low wages, and lack of jobs were the causes of homelessness and poverty in the area. Health related issues, including accidents, addiction, and mental health problems were mentioned by 38% of respondents. The other major theme was a lack of services and an insufficient safety net, mentioned by 31% of respondents. While the majority of respondents wrote about systemic or health issues, there were two notable exceptions. One respondent wrote, “Available social services and a generous and welcoming community” was the cause of homelessness. And another wrote that “having a suboxone clinic AND methadone clinic” was the cause.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More affordable housing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More direct services and resources</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give voice, change attitudes, compassion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and community engagement, forums</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy changes for the common good and fair taxation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment and job training</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livable wage</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coding of Question 4 resulted in several key themes, with more affordable housing and more direct services and resources rising to the top of the list of what people believe can help solve homelessness. The third most common response was to shift attitudes to more compassion...
and empathy towards the homeless. The fourth most common response was community collaboration and engagement, which shows the importance of the forums that the committee held. The fifth most common theme focused on policy, showing the importance of systemic changes and policy advocacy.

The Salt Lake City, Utah model to end chronic homelessness was mentioned by two respondents. A respondent also mentioned, “[Look at] what the European way can teach us”. Another respondent noted, “We are all just a [single event] away from being homeless.”

It is important to note that none of the participants rated the problem of homelessness lower than a 6, meaning that there was awareness of the depth of the problem among those who attended the forum. Several people also expressed an interest in assisting the committee in planning future forums, indicating that the forum was successful in engaging the community in ongoing advocacy. Following this forum, the Changeworks Committee discussed ways to connect to people experiencing homelessness who were already contributing to the community through volunteer work. Telling the story of these community contributions to the general public had the potential to shift perceptions of the homeless.

The data from the survey was useful for informing the work of the committee. It helped to dictate the topics of the June 2016 forum and the February 2017 forum. The committee discussed the importance of aggregating and summarizing the data that was collected. Due to the volunteer nature of the committee, this work was not performed until the spring of 2017. Members of the committee questioned if having the event during the monthly Brattleboro Gallery Walk was the best choice for the night, since about 60 people attended rather than over 100 at the previous two community meetings.
The Coffee & Conversations exhibit was launched during the monthly Friday Night Gallery Walk event in Brattleboro at the River Garden in December 2015. The following night there was a larger event at the River Garden, with about 75 people in attendance for a story slam (Shaw, 2015). The public heard very personal, emotional stories of the experience of homelessness in Windham County.

This Coffee & Conversations exhibit allowed the committee to build new allies in the art community. It also created stronger bonds between those who have and those who have not experienced homelessness. One of the initial ideas for this event was to strengthen the connections with the business community, but I believe this is yet to be fully realized. Personally, I was deeply moved by the stories of those who performed during the story slam, as well as those in the Coffee & Conversations video and photographs. The Changeworks committee used some of the photographs from the exhibit to create posters for the Power of Collaboration and the Spaces forums.

The Power of Collaboration Forum at the River Garden

There were approximately 75 people in attendance at the second public forum on The Power of Collaboration. The panelist from the Brattleboro Retreat said, “Homelessness is clearly the symptom of the problem. It is the downstream result of systematic lack of opportunity, and large-scale drug operations in other countries."

Another panelist spoke at about who can and cannot be in public spaces. If a family is in front of a business having an ice cream, the public sees this as positive but if someone who has the appearance of being homeless is seen in the same space the situation may be judged as
loitering. The chief of police stated, "Just because you're on a bench or in a cardboard box, the police department has no right to go up there and look in your box or backpack. None whatsoever. You're still entitled to every right and you will be treated as such." The chief stressed the importance of defending the constitutional rights of all people.

One suggestion from the audience was to have business cards printed with information about homeless services and community meals available in town. These cards could then be distributed to all Main Street businesses. The board members of GWC had discussed a similar idea during the previous year. Other members of the public brought up issues with the conversion of public space into private space and issues of unemployment.

The turnout of approximately 75 people provided a sufficient crowd to generate a meaningful public discourse. I was impressed with the depth and content of the discussions. The committee hoped that the follow-up to this forum would lead to a deeper use of the collective impact model in Windham County. Though a formal collective impact initiative was set up, a number of stronger collaborations with the municipal government and local service providers were created, which were in line with many of the principles of collective impact.

Development Review Board (DRB) Meeting

Twelve days after the forum on collaboration, the Groundworks organization presented a proposal to the town of Brattleboro’s Development Review Board (DRB) on a new location at Frost St. for the Seasonal Overflow Shelter and the food shelf. The seasonal overflow shelter serves about 25-30 homeless individuals per night from November to April. The food shelf serves approximately 1,000 individuals per month who are food insecure. The DRB meeting on June 20, 2016 had presentations from both Groundworks and the engineering company hired to create the architectural plans for the new shelter location. The DRB was tasked with deciding
whether or not the plans conformed to the town’s zoning ordinances. Several members of a small neighborhood group called F.E.E.T. (Frost, Elliot, Elm Triangle) Neighbors attended the meeting to give public testimony in opposition to the proposed plans. The members of the Changeworks committee attended the meeting to listen to both sides of the issue.

Most members of the F.E.E.T. group who attended lived within a few blocks of the proposed location for the shelter. Quotes from the group included,

A wall, a solid wall that you cannot climb over and you cannot climb under, and you cannot see through, and that smoke cannot get through is my dream, would be my fantasy. And, also along the sidewalk. Because of the population that’s being served. Because of the lack of restrictions on the population that is being served.

Another member of the group stressed “Mitigating the undue, adverse impacts to the community” and the “Citizen disputes, disorderly conduct, things like yelling. Those carry, those travel beyond the buffers. The buffers are not adequate” (Brattleboro Community TV, 2016).

The comments about walls and the negative behaviors of those culturally different seemed to mirror the harsh comments being made at the same time by then-President candidate Donald Trump about building a wall across the border with Mexico. This sentiment was a surprise to the Changeworks committee, as the F.E.E.T. neighborhood’s mission is “Taking Small Steps to Build a Greater Community” (F.E.E.T. Neighbors in Brattleboro, nd) and Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders signs are a common sight in the front yards in the neighborhood. The proposed site was also located in a mixed-use zone where it was unlikely to significantly impact the F.E.E.T Neighbors; with a large lumber processing yard directly across the street from the proposed shelter location, a commercial business abutting the property, a recovery center two buildings away, and a treatment center three buildings away.
Several community members made comments to support the proposal. One mentioned that the two current shelters in town had co-existed peacefully in residential neighborhoods for many years, one for 20 years, the other for 35 years. Another community member implored the community to ensure, “that we are not stigmatizing homelessness.” “This is a community issue, not an “us vs. them” issue.” (Brattleboro Community TV, 2016) Later in the evening, following approximately four hours of discussion and public comments, the proposal was eventually approved by the DRB.

A few days following this approval, a letter to the editor from two members of the F.E.E.T. group was published in the newspaper, which included the quote:

A concentration of "at risk" individuals that will have an impact through noise such as raised voices, fights, loud music, vehicles idling, stopping and starting and police and rescue sirens; smells such as cigarette smoke, vomit, urine, and vehicles idling which include the rescue and police; increased lights from vehicles, security lights on and around the building, and neighbors putting their own lights on for increased safety; security measures such as a fence requirement in a flood zone necessitates that it be 18-inches off the ground (which is not protection or containment at all), people cutting through back yards and tenting or just sleeping or passing out behind our houses, increased drug dealing, and prostitution; the impact on abutting long-standing neighbors; and an over-riding feeling of unrest and fear increased 24/7 with a year-round fully functioning "wet" homeless facility (Flatley & Miskis, 2016).

This quote is a clear example of framing homelessness as both sin and sickness, without regard for the greater systemic root causes.

The negative perceptions expressed towards homeless people during and following the
DRB meeting were the main discussion points at the next several Changeworks meetings. The negative perceptions surrounding the Frost St. project brought to light the large challenges faced in reframing homelessness as a systemic issue. One small volunteer committee cannot completely reframe these deep-seated, personal opinions with just a few community discussions. There needs to be a broader movement that brings in the voices of all those affected, from all classes, that sheds light on the importance of a deep connection within the community, local government, social service sector, and the business sector. The anger should be towards a system that creates widespread homelessness in the richest country in the world, not towards those who have been victimized by the system. Nevertheless, the proposal passed, and was also supported by members of the local community.

*Radio Ad for WKVT Radio*

Following the negative comments made disparaging those who are or have been homeless, the committee and members of the GWC board of directors decided to record radio PSAs to show public support for the organization’s work. These PSAs framed the solutions to the problems as being accomplished through community collaboration. The announcements also framed housing as a rights-based issue.

In my ad, I said, “This is Scott Sharland, Groundworks Collaborative Board Member. I support Groundworks because children, parents, veterans, and all people experiencing homelessness deserve dignity, adequate housing and food.” During the Load the Latchis event the following month, I told the WKVT radio interviewer, “This organization understands the systemic root causes of poverty and is actively working to change things for the better.” The footprint for WKVT’s radio coverage includes all of Windham County, which has a population of 44,000 people. The repetition of the ads from the committee has reached a significant number
of citizens of the county, as WKVT is the major local radio station.

_Spaces Forum at The River Garden_

The third forum, which focused on the topic of Spaces, was held at The River Garden with approximately 65 people in attendance. The Town Manager said that Brattleboro has a history of funding non-profit services in the community through the yearly representative town meeting. He said the town is also considering real estate options for the future location of the Seasonal Overflow Shelter. Lawrence Wardlaw who was on the panel from GWC discussed the complex feelings of being on the “other side of the table now,” referring to his previous experience of being without stable housing. The Executive Director of the local housing trust mentioned the success of permanent supportive housing in Hartford, CT, and detailed the plans to convert the old Lamplighter Inn to a PSH site called Great River Terrace. They plan to open this PSH site is 2018.

During the question & answer portion of the forum, one audience member spoke about the negative perceptions of the homeless, as she has heard people say, “They are all dangerous.” Her suggestion was to get more stories of people who have experienced homelessness out into the media. A second audience member spoke about how many chronically homeless people have been housed during the past two years in the community through the Housing First Model. A Groundworks client was in the audience and shared his story of losing his housing. He talked about being scoffed at and that people do not say “Hi” to him. He said that people can make multiple mistakes, and there are some very beautiful people who have lost their housing. He implored everyone present to “not give up on us.”

The Spaces Forum provided several insights on what is happening with the views on homelessness in Windham County, along with some of the actions being taken to address the
issue. The Changeworks committee was very intentional about putting together the panel, ensuring representation from a client, two directors from local organizations working on implementing solutions, the town manager, and the director of the library, which often serves as a makeshift day shelter. Lawrence’s comment about now sitting on the other side of table struck me the most, as it boldly displayed the mixed emotions that come along with trying to put an experience like homelessness behind you.

The committee decided to reduce the panel discussion time to increase the amount of audience question & answer time. This resulted in compelling stories from the audience about the views on homelessness. A client who I had previously met while volunteering at the Seasonal Overflow Shelter stood up to tell his story, and everyone was captivated. He emphasized that he had never before been homeless and described the outside forces that led to the loss of stable housing. He recounted how he had been a successful farmer earlier in life, but worsening conditions in his home state led him to move to New England to seek work. Eventually homelessness resulted when he could not secure employment. When another audience member asked what could be done to help beyond donating money, the client urged people to get involved in other ways and listed the ways in which one could volunteer. The Director of the GWC humorously responded this by telling the client, “You are hired as Director of Public Relations” (Brattleboro Community TV, 2017). The message I received from observing this exchange was that this client was highly capable, and that the system had failed him. He was not homeless due to sin or sickness.

**Evaluation**

The Changeworks committee utilized a variety of techniques in seeking to change public perceptions on homelessness in order to generate support for future policy change. These
techniques included facilitation of community meetings, developing of a strategic plan, creation of advocacy media, planning and implementing public forums, and listening to community concerns. Following more than two years of work, the committee has patched together these various techniques to shift public perception, but has worked less on policy change. In the following section, I evaluate this work using Schultz’s Policy Roadmap, Unsicker’s Policy Circles, and Lakoff’s Reframing.

**The Roadmap for Policy Advocacy**

Shultz lays out five steps for planning and implementing a policy advocacy intervention. (Shultz, 2002) These steps begin with defining the policy objectives. The second step is determining the target audience of decision makers. This includes allies, lobbyists, constituents, etc. In the third step in Shultz’s road map, advocates need to develop a message that is effective on two fronts. “First, they must make your case on the merits; second, they need to make it clear to your main targets that it is also in their self-interest to do what you are asking” (Shultz, 2002, p. 76).

Picking the messengers, the fourth step, puts a human face on an issue. Someone with expertise, credibility, and facts is needed. This creates political clout. Choosing the right people to represent a message can be just as important as the message itself. “Messengers who put a human face on the issue help ground campaigns in compelling reality, making the message difficult to ignore” (Shultz, 2002, p. 77). Shultz’s fifth step is taking action, which may include communications, protests, actions to undermine opposition, or compromise. This roadmap helped guide the work I did with the Changeworks committee.

The committee is working to reframe the public perception of homelessness away from individual blame and towards systemic accountability by executing its strategic plan. This plan
defined its objectives for the first 3 years that focus on policy advocacy. By taking the time to come up with this strategic plan, the committee fulfilled the first step of Shultz’s roadmap.

The Changeworks committee began the process of connecting to key stakeholders, such as the town manager and a state senator. Allies include other organizations working with those in poverty or homelessness, including SEVCA, Our Place Drop-in Center, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust (WWHT), and Brattleboro Housing Partnership (formerly Authority). These partnerships have led to several WWHT apartments utilizing the Housing First Model. At the most recent forum, the Executive Director of WWHT announced that they are converting a motel into PSH units.

The committee was effective at creating a message and choosing strong messengers. Through utilizing the panel format, we were able to have former clients, town leaders, and the directors of local nonprofit organizations come together to discuss the systemic root causes. Another success in this area was bringing together former clients as the messengers for the Coffee & Conversations projects, where a platform was created to tell their stories through pictures, video, art, and spoken word. The collective stories of those who were without stable housing provided powerful imagery for the public. This action has had a lasting impact on the community, especially the arts community.

Policy Circles Model

Complimentary to Shultz’s Roadmap, Unsicker posits that there are three intersecting policy circles that make up a policy advocacy campaign. These are policy, politics, and strategy. These three circles are surrounded by the largest circle, context, which represents the overall political-economic-cultural context where advocacy plays out (Unsiscker, 2013). There is a
circle in the center to represent the advocates, as the work of the advocates draws upon all the other circles.

The policy circle is likened to Shultz’s first step of defining the objectives, but this model also includes information gathering and root cause analysis. The politics circle is akin to Shultz’s targeting of the audience. In the politics circle, policy makers are the main audience of the advocates; along with supporters, opponents, the media, and the public (Unsicker, 2013). Finally, the strategy circle covers Shultz’s final three steps, creating the messages, picking the messengers, and taking action. The strategy circle also brings in an analysis of the political system as well as how to create goals, anticipate results, and outline tactics to get what advocates want (Unsicker, 2013). Unsicker’s model allows for more overlaps, complexity, and context than Shultz’s roadmap due to the intersecting nature of the circles.

Figure 1: Unsicker’s Policy Circles Model (from Unsicker, 2013, p. 17).
When examining the work of the committee through Unsicker’s Policy Circles framework, a key question to ask is “What did the committee want?” The answer is to end homelessness, to be accomplished through a paradigm shift resulting in fundamental changes to the system in the United States, where there would be far greater income equity. The committee’s short-term desire was to inform and share with the public what is already known about ending homelessness and poverty. In March of 2017 at the annual town meeting, the citizens of Brattleboro voted to formally become a “Compassionate Community.” What this meant to the committee was to treat everyone with respect, which in the opinion of the committee includes ensuring all are housed. This shows that Brattleboro has moved in the direction we wanted.

The next area to examine is which policy changes will create the desired outcome. Policy changes need to create an adequate stock of affordable housing. Funding for Housing First, shelters, and homelessness prevention are also needed. The policies need to be designed in a way that meets people where they are at, respecting geography, time, and access. In addition, equity is needed in education, economics, healthcare, and the justice system. Ultimately, the desire would be the end of the predatory form of capitalism that currently exists in the US.

The politics circle asks who are the decision makers responsible for the desired changes. In this case, it is the local, state, and federal government, along with the community of citizens who would be supporters of the cause. The committee engaged citizens through numerous meetings and forums, public information, radio ads, and volunteering. Once the community is fully engaged, the work of advocacy will be made easier due to the broad base of support.
Reframing

The power of reframing has allowed the committee to have action-oriented approach towards solutions to the root causes of homelessness. The messaging has emphasized the lack of affordable housing, insufficient local wages, and the failure of the social safety net.

It is clearly inaccurate to define the causes of homelessness merely as laziness, sickness, or immorality on the part of those in poverty. The problem is clearly too far widespread. Reframing the cause as systemic may be more logical, but is not necessarily more obvious. By looking at how to activate frames in the minds of public audiences that focus on the positive actions steps that can be taken to solve homelessness, a public paradigm shift can occur. On the Changeworks committee we tried to do this. We also need to reframe the negative views that target homeless people, while simultaneously enacting policies that support their constitutional rights. The goal is to have policies that fully fund the safety net required to provide housing and other services.

Many of the innovative housing policies being worked on incorporate a systemic approach; where investment in people, solidarity, and human rights are emphasized as solutions to homelessness. The Housing First model answers the question “Why are people homeless?” with a systemic frame: “because they don’t have stable housing.” The solution is contained in that response: provide housing for those who don’t have it, and provide the supports to help keep them in that housing—then the problem at hand is solved.

The committee was able to increase public understanding that the current system is crisis-based, where individuals cannot get assistance until they are evicted. This approach is less cost-effective than preventative or long-term solutions. The committee has not yet been able to fully spread this message to the public, which is an area of future work. The committee can help the
public to understand that the state needs to invest the more-cost effective approaches that will support people.

The reframing work of the committee has not yet led to major municipal policy changes. A future target for this are would be the no camping on public land ordinance for Brattleboro, which would likely be ruled unconstitutional if ever challenged in court. This ordinance is similar to the vagrancy laws, which make life difficult for those experiencing homelessness. The committee’s work has led to additional partnerships with community, town government, and the local police department. Thought not a policy, these partnerships have the potential for implementation of future policy solutions.

We did face limitations in our ability to reframe. The capacity of the committee was limited due to its volunteer nature. We also observed times when we were “preaching to the choir.” The people who already saw homelessness within a systemic frame came to our events. We attempted to find creative ways to reach those who believed in the bootstraps ideology, but I think we have only scratched the surface.

Not conducting a survey limited my ability to properly evaluate the efficacy of the committee’s radio ads. The committee’s approach to listing targets, allies, and opponents was informal. Unsicker and Shultz both stress having a clear list of who to target and how to influence them. Not having a clear list limited my ability to evaluate the efficacy of the policy advocacy effort.

**Further Inquiry**

Additional research is needed to determine if reframing homelessness increases the likelihood that new policies are created to address the systemic causes. This would require
investigating similar reframing work that is being done in other parts of the country, and compare the desired to the actual policy outcomes.

A potential lens to study system solutions to homelessness would be the concept of systems thinking. When considering a problem through a systems-thinking lens, the entire system must be examined. Systems thinking recognizes the great number of variables and the deep complexities that exist in the world. This means there are many aspects of homelessness for further research.

With a very low vacancy rate (0.5%) in Windham County, research could be conducting to further understand who is being left out of housing and pushed towards homelessness. This research could delve into the roles played by race, disability, and health disparities in this dynamic. This may help understand whether or not white, middle and upper class people are more likely to get the limited apartments that are available.

**Conclusion**

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring” (1967, para. 48). This quote epitomizes the beliefs of the Changeworks committee. The system that produces poverty and homelessness needs restructuring. To begin that process, the Changeworks committee has looked at reframing the message on the root cause of homelessness away from individual blame and towards the neoliberal economic system. The committee has started working with the community of Windham County to begin this shift in beliefs.

The US is far from being ready to overturn its form of neoliberal capitalism. In the meantime, structural supports within the Housing First model are needed to ensure housing for those experiencing homelessness. The full implementation of these supports requires large-scale
policy change, which invests in these solutions. These changes need to be backed by mainstream public support, which can be made possible through reframing homelessness as a systemic, not individual, issue. This change is starting to happen at the grassroots level in communities such as Windham County, but the work has just begun.
REFERENCES


http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/50025.


Terminology and Acronyms

Policy Advocacy - the process by which people, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to enhance social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions (Unsicker, 2013).

World Café Model – a simple way to create a collaborative dialogue around questions related to community or social service work. The model can be used to meet goals related to creativity strategy, leadership, and community. The model involves creating a safe space where participant go from table to table to brainstorm solutions to a different question at each table. Following several rounds of discussion at individual tables, the insights from each table are shared with the entire group (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015).

Vagrancy Laws - laws that penalize those roaming from place to place without a permanent job, home, or material resources (Legal Information Institute, nd).

Gentrification - alterations in land use patterns and changes in the composition of the neighborhood populations that are resulting in new social organizational patterns in inner cities throughout the United States and other industrialized Western nations (Palen & London, 1984).

The McKinney-Vento Act – legislation passed during the Reagan administration to expand funding for the system of homeless shelters in the US (Mitchell, 2013).

CLC – Course-Linked Capstone

NAEH – National Alliance to End Homelessness

HUD – US Department Housing and Urban Development

GWC – Groundworks Collaborative

SEVCA – Southeastern Vermont Community Action

CSH – Corporation for Supportive Housing

NLIHC – National Low Income Housing Coalition

PSH – Permanent Supportive Housing

DRB – Development Review Board

PSA – Public Service Announcement
Appendices

Appendix A: Changeworks Strategic Plan.

Changeworks is an advocacy committee made up of staff, Board, and community members.

CHANGWORKS OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS

Without substantial changes to public policy at the local, state, and national levels, we will continue to face persistent poverty in our community. Within in the context of the effects of homelessness, poverty and food insecurity, we will promote empowerment for individual needs, advocate for systems change, and seek to be the backbone for collective impact efforts in our community. Here’s how we propose to do it.

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<th>Benchmarks</th>
<th>2016</th>
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<td>Increase Groundworks Collaborative’s public profile through increased publicity, outreach and advocacy</td>
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<td>Foster greater community understanding of systemic and individual causes for homelessness, food insecurity, and poverty</td>
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<td>Actively engage and involve local, State and Federal agencies and officials in order to meet the needs of all by changing/improving the system</td>
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<td>Expand a network of allies working toward systemic change</td>
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<td>Ensure clients participate and lead advocacy efforts</td>
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<td>Create an annual Advocacy Plan with concrete and accountable strategies</td>
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<td>Host quarterly conversations on root causes of poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity for staff, Board, community, and clients</td>
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Appendix B: Conversations Vermont Video Transcript


Allison: Josh what are you seeing at Morningside? Are you seeing an increase of people and what are the demographics?

Josh:
Just so we're clear, our agencies are interacting with the system in different ways. Morningside shelter is at thirty bed shelter in Brattleboro that serves individual male, female, and also families with children. We have 30 beds but the arrangement of the rooms at any given time, we have about 25 people that are there. Our capacity is only so much. If there's a hundred people that need to come into the shelter, we can only get in about 25 people at a time.

Allison: Where do they go if they can't get in there?

Josh:
In Brattleboro they go to the emergency room social after that's at the First Baptist Church and in Bellows Falls, Greater Falls Warming Shelter that's right across the river in Walpole. And both are being heavily utilized this winter. It's a testament to the fact, that people, that how many people need housing. And so we have people they call it a try to get into the shelter. Over the last three months, we've had about 150 people, individual people, that have called trying to get into the shelter. We are only able to get about 15 percent of those callers into a bed. So there's another huge amount of folks that are in need of housing support.

Allison: What are they doing if they can't get in?

Josh:
Some of those folks go to the overflow shelter or to the warming shelter here in Bellows Falls. Others will sleep on couches, stay at friends houses. Which, then, we talk about these ripples. It puts pressure on those folks and the potential for eviction increases because gas can only stay on in a lot of low-income or subsidized units for two weeks. And so once you go past few weeks then you're putting that housing into jeopardy. People are sleeping in their cars. So, a lot of movement, bouncing from one family to another. Bringing small children in tow. So we talk about the ripple effects of homelessness, the trauma. I mean a lot of the trauma experiences that we see here, I should say, some of them are not direct trauma from being in an abusive relationship, but just the trauma of interacting with the system and bouncing around from house to house, not having the
stability, not being able to foster a loving and supportive attachment, because you’re always moving around. It’s not that parents aren’t trying. We see parents that have amazing survival skills and kids that are so resilient, but yet we’re exposing them to situations that are… It’s doing large damage that we are going to have to reap the repercussions 10-15 years down the line.

DECONSTRUCTING THE SYSTEM

Allison: What do you think is causing this kind of continued increase in homelessness?

Josh:
The first thing that I would point to is, you know, over the last thirty, forty, fifty years productivity in this country in terms of gross national product has steadily climbed. We are in a great environment for an economy. Businesses are doing really well. CEOs are making all-time highs right now. Over that same period, we have wages, real wages, that are stagnating. They haven’t gone up really at all. They haven’t gone up to keep up with the productivity, they also have gone up to keep up with the cost of living. You multiply that out thirty, forty years, it’s where we are at today where we’re celebrating the governor and the state increasing the minimum wage to $9.10… 9.15. But we’re also looking at what is the real housing wage or the livable wage. And that gap is going to be upwards of seventeen to nineteen dollars an hour. As long as we have this great disparity between what wages are and what it costs to live in a place, we’re going to have issues that we face with homelessness. People are falling out homes because they get behind for whatever reason, and I think the community at large wants to point the finger and say that it’s bad choices. But it neglects the fact of the system that they’re operating in doesn’t allow for any sort of slip-up or mistake whatsoever. So if you do things exactly right, you may be able to get by. But if you have a health emergency, if your car breaks down, if you call in sick, you’re going to get fired. You get behind in rent.

I’m very much a proponent that, the way we think about poor people and the way that we think about poverty is that it’s the person’s fault. And so, if it’s the person’s fault, then that’s going to inform all the programs. It’s going inform the way that we work with people. As opposed to saying let’s take a step back and see how the system is constructed and produces this and will continue to produce this and these numbers will get larger. So, you know, it’s hard to say that it’s a person’s fault for being lazy. So, do we have chronic laziness in this country? Is it increasing? Are people catching laziness? And so, that’s why there’s more impoverished? And that’s what some people, if you follow the logic of thought out, that’s where it would take you. As opposed to saying the system… There’s mass inequity in this system that continues to grow. And so, it’s going to produce homelessness, poverty, more and people having to use food shelves.

Pat:
And look at how we set up our system and our guidelines. If you have an electric disconnect… not just if you’re behind in your electric, let me help you. You need to have a disconnect. So, we put people already down on the ground to be able to receive the help. Do have an eviction notice? Oh you don’t? You know if someone came to me and
said, “you know in a couple weeks I know going to have problems paying my rent.” You know, the way that the money is set up, the help is set up, it’s like well, come back when you're going have a disconnect. When your landlord has actually given you a disconnect notice. Then I can pull down some of these funds and be able to say now you’re homeless and I can use this money. That doesn't teach people to… that doesn't reward them for saying, “Hey, I'm gonna have a problem next month.” That rewards them for saying, “Hey, I'm going to wait. I'm not even going to open my electric bill until its red, and then I know I can go get help.” So we have set the system up for help in that way of putting people down.

Lisa:  
So they have to wait till they get to the crisis. And then they have to deal with the stress of that crisis. And then they’ll go and get the help. But just that stress itself of keep getting to that point.

TRANSITIONING TO A NEW APPROACH

Josh:  
The most expensive thing that we can to do is put somebody in a motel. The next most expensive thing to do is you put them into a shelter. Then you have an apartment. Then you have paying for whatever backrent or situation that they might happen to be in to keep them in housing. So it's the cheaper thing to do. It's the most humane thing to do, because you're not going to have to enter the system if you can remain in housing. And yet, because our approach is set up in a crisis approach, this continues to go on. And it's a big debate right now as we're starting the legislative session today. Today we're starting. And so we're gonna have to cut money out of the budget. That's what all the legislators are talking about is “where these cuts gonna come from.” And every time there is cuts, human services is on the chopping block. And programs like this are seen as are seen as a waste of funds but necessary. And so legislators feel like their hands are tied. And we can’t have conversations about moving from our approach to a new approach with investment. Because you have to have investment dollars to change the approach to the way that the system is set up. And so we're fighting to keep what little money we have to keep these crisis approaches going, knowing that we know what works.

It's no secret how you can get people housed. You get them an apartment. You help pay for some of their rent. And you bring some wrap-around services when needed. And you get them hooked up with jobs and child care and support transportation and the list goes on and on. It's a long process, but we know what works. We just need the funding and the support to do that.

Josh:  
So when we're looking at these all these things as a service provider, you're subjected to the whims of the state or other funders. And I think a few of us got together. Pat being the impetus for this… to say, okay if we had a little bit of money, what would we create? And so there were representatives from 5 Brattleboro agencies, where we take a Brattleboro focus, but we definitely are open to helping people throughout the county.
We have representatives from HCRS, Youth Services, Women’s Freedom Center, Winston Prouty, SEVCA, and Morningside Shelter.

And we were able to get a little bit money from Brattleboro area affordable housing to support the work which was very generous contribution on their part. To say, okay for people that don't fit into any of these sharply defined categories for assistance or have something that we see as preventive, it might not be a direct housing need, but something that's going to have an impact on their housing. We can bring to this group, put them before this group, and say okay well how about we help them in a creative way. We pull some resources together and maybe we subsidize part of their rent for a few months. Maybe we help take care of a car payment or a car repair so that they're able to get to work. They don’t lose their jobs. Their able to maintain their housing. And it started this summer, and it's been a really interesting exercise. Both to be able to work with people in that way, with a little bit more freedom and flexibility. But also to interact with other service agencies in a collaborative, and I would say, rigorous. We really challenge one another.

Josh:
You know, as you're there talking, I'm sitting here thinking. We're investing in people and so what I’ve seen a lot of in the assists that we have provided. It’s 2, 3, 5 months out. And so we are really investing in the person, as opposed to paying for a back-rent or taking care of something that happened in the past. This is really looking forward, which also changes the dynamic between the agency and the individual that we are working with, because in a manner of speaking, we believe in what's going on with you.

Josh:
I think the only thing that I would add is that we're up here representing agencies and I think it's easy to think about homelessness and poverty as an agency or a government issue. But it’s really a community issue and viewing it in such a way, we've talked a little bit about the system today. I would encourage folks to think about how the system supports this, or keeps reproducing these things that we're seeing today. As opposed to pointing the finger at lazy people and deconstruct that myth a bit.
Appendix C: Housing in Windham County Infographic.

Created by Scott Sharland.

**Housing in Windham County: Do the Math**

**WAGES?**

- **$21.69** Livable Wage in Windham County
  - For a single adult, working full-time, with one child and living in fair market housing.

- **$9.60** The current minimum wage in VT

**VACANCY?**

- **4 to 6%** Rental vacancy rate in healthy markets
  - This is for apartments in multifamily buildings

- **0.5%** Rental vacancy rate in Windham County

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# Appendix D: Survey for Myths & Realities Forum

**Survey for The Commons Voices Live! Myths & Realities of Homelessness**

1. Is homelessness an important problem in our community? Please rate from 1 to 10.  
   \[1 = \text{not important}; \quad 10 = \text{very important}\] 
   
2. What do you feel are the causes of homelessness and poverty in greater Brattleboro?

3. Which topics would you like to see discussed at future public forums?

4. What can be done to help solve homelessness?

5. What skills/resources can you offer? How would you like to volunteer?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participate in planning of forums like this one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate tarps, sleeping bags, or blankets for Seasonal Overflow Shelter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer for a shift or to prepare meals at Seasonal Overflow Shelter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support events that collect food for area food shelves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hire a Groundworks client to do lawncare, shovel snow, or other jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate to the church’s Shelter Rent Fund.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you would like to volunteer or contribute in some way, please provide:

Name: ________________________________
Email: _______________________________
Phone: ______________________________

We appreciate you taking the time to fill out our survey!