Community Engagement Project

HONR 401: Exploring Personal Leadership

Dylan Riess

Spring 2019

There’s a family down the street from you that’s about to be evicted. You feel bad for them, but you don’t know what you could do or how you could help. This family may face homelessness very soon if they don’t come up with the money for rent. They have nowhere to turn, and you don’t know where to point them. For my Community Engagement Project, I decided to look into the issue of homelessness in Mankato, why it happens, and how people – including myself – can help. I learned that a larger, even more important problem than homelessness can be near-homelessness, and that there are so many resources and ways to help those communities.

**Social Change Model**

When we begin to combat an issue that arises in our community, we can’t expect to make the entire problem go away overnight. That is where the Social Change Model of Leadership Development comes in. The Social Change model is “a collaborative approach to leadership that can bring the talent of all members of a group to their shared purposes” and is “concerned with effecting change on behalf of others and society” (Komives and Wagner, xiii). The SCM helps break down a large project into smaller, more manageable chunks, and uses assets and strengths of people all over the community to break down the project even more. Without one person stuck doing a majority of the work, a project can begin to look a lot less intimidating.

The Social Change Model has seven core values: collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, and citizenship. These are the core values that have led me through my work with the homelessness population in Mankato. These seven major values are a great way to reflect on how leaders deal with specific situations and brainstorm ways they can become better leaders for the next situation.

**Origin of Issue**

Homelessness is by the majority a silent problem in Mankato. Most people don’t ever see members of the homeless or near-homeless communities in Mankato; however, that does not mean that those people do not exist. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the definition of someone who is homeless is “an individual who lacks housing without regard to whether the individual is a member of a family, including an individual whose primary residence during the night is a supervised public or private facility (e.g., shelters) that provides temporary living accommodations, and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing” (Nishio et al, 180-188). However, this is not the only population that is faced with homelessness. There are many people who are not currently homeless but may be facing eviction or other penalties that may cause them to not be able to afford a place to live.

Another major cause of homelessness can be mental illness or substance abuse. Those odds of those who have a severe mental illness becoming homeless are “10-20 times greater than that seen among the general population” (Nishio et al, 180-188). People with mental problems, be it a mood, personality, psychotic, substance-related, or anxiety disorder, are more likely to end up homeless than their equivalent non-mental illness peers.

**Why Can’t the Issue be Resolved?**

Like many other problems in the world, it may seem that the issue of homelessness in Mankato – and other areas – should be an easy fix. Once programs are put into place, one would assume people would come take advantage of them as soon as possible. This is not the case. Many homeless people don’t take advantage of resources and try to come out of homelessness for various reasons. Homelessness is not just a problem that has to do with money; “it is a loss of all support, including family relationships and friendships. If these individuals had not lost their good relationships with others, they would not have been homeless” (Nishio et al, 180-188). Relationships and human contact are highly important to the human psyche. When that support system is taken away, people feel like they have nowhere to turn. Even with the resources available and waiting, those in that particular situation may not choose to take support.

There are many other reasons that people have trouble pulling themselves out of homelessness: having no job, dislike of homeless shelters, trouble with human relationships, a dislike of receiving public assistance, and not wanting place of residence known because of debt (Nishio et al, 180-188). People suffering from homelessness can’t just be put in a box; they are there for numerous different reasons and there are just as many reasons why they have trouble lifting themselves back out.

**Key Stakeholders**

In helping prevent homelessness and lift people out of it, there are several major stakeholders in the issue. The two primary organizations that help with homelessness in Mankato are Minnesota Valley Action Council and Partners for Affordable Housing.

The mission of Minnesota Valley Action Council, or MVAC, is “that hard work should be valued and rewarded, that working people are struggling and that MVAC provides solutions [They] develop resources and opportunities that empower people in low-wage work to secure affordable housing, viable transportation, employment, training for employment and educational opportunities for children” (Minnesota Valley Action Council). MVAC offers many different services, including help with finances, transportation, housing, energy, employment, and pregnancy and children. In the housing service, they offer help mainly for people who are at risk of homelessness. The main two programs are rental assistance and homelessness prevention. Homelessness prevention involves signing up and getting help on house payments or other housing expenses for as little as a month. If a family or person can get through just one crisis, there are good odds that they will end up keeping their house or apartment.

Partners for Affordable Housing is another organization in Mankato that helps the homeless and near-homelessness populations. Partners for Affordable Housing, or PAH, “believes it is essential that affordable housing and temporary shelter be available to those in need. The public interest is best served when all citizens have the opportunity to properly house themselves … and the cost of housing should not disproportionately deplete the already stretched finances of the poor and homeless” (Partners for Affordable Housing).

I connected with two workers at Minnesota Valley Action Council on two separate occasions over the course of this past semester. The first time was when they came into my management class, and the second time was for my community engagement project. Both times, they spoke on some of the programs MVAC does, in particular the homelessness prevention program and the car donation program. They were both very passionate about the topics they spoke on.

**My Experience**

For my community development project, I decided to help the homeless population in Mankato in a small way. When MVAC came into my Management class early this Spring 2019 semester, it really struck a chord with me. Helping prevent homelessness was something I felt very passionate about.

With help, I developed my passion into a project: an event for my residents in my job as a Community Advisor. I decided to create an event that would help spread awareness for the homeless population in Mankato and show the residents little ways that they can help. During the event, we had speakers from MVAC, and created little homeless people care packages that we could keep in our cars. These contained essentials like wet wipes, floss, deodorant, water, granola bars, and other little snacks. Though the items themselves may not go a long distance for the homeless community, the knowledge that somebody out there cares for them can mean a whole lot more. As well, for the residents, it helped them open their eyes and see that these people do exist, and there are programs that are trying – and succeeding – to help.

**Conclusion**

For my Community Engagement Project, I decided to look into the issue of homelessness in Mankato, why it happens, and how people – including myself – can help. I learned that a larger, even more important problem than homelessness can be near-homelessness, and that there are so many resources and ways to help those communities.

The homeless population in Mankato may not be completely lifted out of their problems yet, but with help and care, they have a good chance to get a job, housing, and integrate back into life. Every little bit of effort can go a long way in their lives.

**References**

“About Us.” *Partners for Affordable Housing*, Greater Mankato United Way Agency, partnersforhousing.org/about-us/.

Komives, Susan R., and Wendy Wagner. *Leadership for a Better World: Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development*. 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2017.

Nishio, Akihiro, et al. “Causes of Homelessness Prevalence: Relationship between Homelessness and Disability.” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, vol. 71, no. 3, 24 Oct. 2016, pp. 180–188., doi:10.1111/pcn.12469.

“Our Mission.” *Minnesota Valley Action Council*, Minnesota Valley Action Council, www.mnvac.org/about-us/our-mission/.