

A PLACE CALLED HOME: THE WRJ PACIFIC DISTRICT SENIOR HOMELESSNESS PROJECT

“You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old...”

--Leviticus 19:32

It is rare to find anyone in 2021 who can say for certain they'll never find themselves without a place to call home. Illness strikes, families fall apart, jobs are lost. No one escapes life's tragedies, and for someone who has reached their 60s, 70s, or 80s—whether they've worked all their lives or have taken care of others—it is frightening. While seniors only represent a small fraction of the American and Canadian homeless population, many lose permanent housing at a time when they become increasingly vulnerable physically and emotionally. The ensuing isolation and depression can cause a downward spiral. Judaism teaches deference to the aged, but many are left to fend for themselves because their loved ones can't care for them, or after being independent all their lives, they're simply too embarrassed to ask for help. Instead, they may live in their cars in parking lots, sleep on chairs in church basements, or at last resort, camp out on the street.

There is an old saying: “Pray as though it depends on God. Act as though it depends on you.” The homelessness problem is massive, but journeys really do begin with a single step. As it is written in the Talmud, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief...You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Women of Reform Judaism has a long and illustrious history of being steeped in the fight for social change, from women's suffrage to LGBTQ rights. With three of our Pacific District states registering homeless rates at twice the national average (Hawaii, Oregon, and California), we hope our sisters in the entire PD—the largest geographical district in the WRJ--will join in the fight against homelessness. If we all work together, who knows what impact we could have?

We wish you well as you begin your journey, and we stand with you.

The WRJ Pacific District Programming Committee
June, 2021

WHO ARE THE HOMELESS?

Late-onset homelessness among those age 50 and older (i.e. those who never had been homeless previously) primarily is caused by: job loss (theirs or a family member who provided income for the rent or mortgage); marital breakdown; disability or that of a partner; or a partner or family member's death. This contrasts with the causes of early homelessness: poor health; lack of a supportive social structure; low income; brain injury or mental impairment; substance abuse; or a history of incarceration. Even those who may work more than one job may find themselves without permanent housing.

Many homeless find themselves behind on their rent and instead of being evicted, they choose to leave. Some may have had the legal right to stay, but they failed to obtain legal representation.

In most cases, however, affordable housing for the lowest income individuals is the answer, but in today's market of soaring rents and housing prices, there's scarcely enough. What there is may have years' long waiting lists. It may be some time before we know the reverberations of the pandemic on those who are homeless or nearly homeless, but we are not powerless to help now.

PROJECTS

Below are list of projects designed to aid homeless seniors that you might pursue. Hopefully, you'll either find one appropriate for your sisterhood/congregation, or they will serve as the impetus for the creation of a project more suitable for your needs. Nevertheless, WRJ PD wants to hear what you're doing and how successful it's been so we can pass it on to other District members. Please let us know by filling out the How We Did It: PD Sisterhoods/Congregations Attack Homelessness form at: <http://bit.ly/HomelessnessProject>. Thank you.

DONATE...

- Cots and folding beds to shelters with limited comfortable bedding for seniors
- Money to nonprofits such as JFCS to pay seniors' rent to keep them in permanent housing
- Food for shelters or seniors living outside
- Blankets, sleeping bags (for warmth), battery-powered fans, and clothing
- Invest in permanent supportive housing
- Money for occasional motel days for seniors if they only can stay in shelters for a limited number of days per week

- Your time by volunteering at shelters and soup kitchens that serve homeless seniors
- Pet food, bowls, toys, and blankets for the beloved companions of homeless seniors

CREATE...

- Secure, guarded parking lots with sanitary facilities and garbage cans for seniors living in their vehicles or who need to tent
- Blankets for homeless seniors
- A driving pool who can take homeless seniors to necessary appointments so they can save money on gas
- A pool of qualified volunteers who can assist homeless seniors in managing their finances
- Attorneys who will provide pro bono or low-cost legal services to assist in solving problems that may keep pre-homeless seniors in their homes
- A committee that can be informed to help seniors who are about to become homeless
- A one-stop action network of members willing to assist homeless seniors or about-to-be-homeless seniors to contact landlords, legal assistance, social service agencies, and other entities on the seniors' behalf

FACILITATE...

- With developers and service providers to adapt and implement HUD's Limited Preference rule to give homeless older adults/vets admission preferences and quicker housing placements
- With low-cost legal services to expand their practice to serve and make their services more accessible to homeless seniors
- The expansion of medical respite or hospice care to cover ill homeless seniors
- With other organizations/corporations to provide short-term motel housing vouchers
- With clergy to provide spiritual services for homeless seniors
- With auto mechanics to provide repair services for vehicles serving as shelter for homeless seniors
- With the search and identification of veterinarians and organizations that could provide food and veterinary care to pets of homeless seniors

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER ACTION

- [Association of Mature American Citizens - Homelessness Among Senior Citizens is a Form of “Elder Abuse”](#)
- [Justice in Aging – How to Prevent and End Homelessness Among Older Adults](#)
- [Shelter Partnership Inc.](#) or <https://www.facebook.com/shelterpartnership/>
- [National Coalition for the Homeless](#)
- [Invisible People \(United States\)](#)
- [Invisible People \(Canada\)](#)
- [Corporation for Supportive Housing](#)
- [Homeless Hub \(Canada\)](#)
- [AARP Homelessness](#)
- [Simmons University - Aging on the Streets](#)
- [Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University - The Growing Problem of Older Adult Homelessness](#)
- 2-1-1 (phone information resource in many areas) provides local information on housing, food, and other assistance in the U.S. and Canada
- [Pets of the Homeless](#) provides food and veterinary care in the U.S. and Canada for pets of the homeless, free sleeping crates to homeless shelters, and works with local service agencies and pet food providers

BACKGROUND ON HOMELESSNESS

“[A Place Called Home: The Tragedy of Senior Homeless](#)” presented by the WRJ PD Programming Committee and moderated by member Deb Lelchuk with: Dr. Margot Kushel, Professor of Medicine at University of California San Francisco, Division Chief and Director of the UCSF Center for Vulnerable Populations, and Director of the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative; Prof. Denise Cloutier, Ph.D., Department of Geography and Research Fellow with the Institute on Aging and Lifelong Health at the University of Victoria (British Columbia, Canada); Wendy Johnson, Executive Director, Justa Center, Phoenix, AZ; Sara Fields, Tikkun Olam Committee member, Temple Akiba, Culver City, CA. View the recording here: <https://youtu.be/eu70E5tuyVE>

Read about Judaism’s stance toward the homeless here:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/judaism-and-the-homeless/>