

Wisconsin Sea Grant | The Water We Swim In

Houselessness and the environment: a roundtable

[MUSIC PLAYING]

HALI JAMA: From Wisconsin Sea Grant, I'm Hali.

BONNIE And I'm Bonnie.

WILLISON:

HALI JAMA: And you're listening to The Water We Swim In, stories about the Great Lakes and the people working towards equity.

BONNIE Wisconsin Sea Grant is based at UW-Madison, which occupies the traditional land of the ho-chunk people. The stories on this podcast span the area we now know as Wisconsin, where the lands and waters are cared for by the 12 native nations that call Wisconsin home.

WILLISON:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

HALI JAMA: So over the summer, I was able to take a race in politics class and study for three weeks in Washington DC. I don't think we didn't go anywhere in DC, we went everywhere. And as we went around, I saw so many homeless people. And so many homeless people that were like, people of color, especially. I knew it was mainly because of gentrification, and it was very evident to see that too because every corner you went to, there were these sky high buildings that were luxurious, that had pools, gyms.

The White House was right there and then two blocks down, there's this community of Black homeless people. And just thinking back to the history of the White House itself, it was literally built by slaves. As a young Black girl walking around Washington DC, the capital of the US, and you're just seeing people that look like you that are literally just on the streets, it's not the best feeling.

In Madison, it's also prevalent. Like, you'll see homeless people, especially on State Street. But I thought it would be something that we can focus on, especially because Wisconsin in general gets the four seasons in a very severe way, and our climate plays a big role in that.

BONNIE Right, like when we think about climate change, the people who are going to be most impacted by changes in the weather are people who are forced out of their housing or don't have access to that.

HALI JAMA: Today, we're featuring a roundtable on houselessness and the environment. We got to talk to people throughout the country who have all been working with their communities to solve housing problems in so many different ways. And in the end, we talked to someone right here in Madison to hear about houselessness in our own community.

First, we talked to Tony Shu. He lives in Boston and after he graduated from college, he started a company called Breaktime.

BONNIE How did you find Tony again?

WILLISON:

HALI JAMA: So I literally was just doing some internet searching. I searched up time and change and houseless, and he was one of the first people to pop up. After he graduated from Harvard, him and his friends started Breaktime, which focuses on helping young adults.

TONY SHU: My name is Tony Shu, I am one of the co-founders of Breaktime, which is a Boston-based organization working to end young adult homelessness. And the way we do that is through purposeful transitional employment. So we help young adults experiencing homelessness, train for and then obtain their first job, which is a critical stepping stone to obtaining permanent housing and then a lifelong career serving one's community.

I think when I first got to college, I noticed a lot of young adults experiencing homelessness in the area and I was studying in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And I was curious to see why there was so much homelessness in an area that had so much wealth and privilege and had so many resources. It was kind of a puzzle to see young adults who were my age who had none of the same access to those resources that I had as a student.

And thinking back on my own life, I was raised by a single mother, and she emigrated to the US. And when she first got here, slept in the back seat of a rental car because she was trying to find her first job and didn't come with much money and barely spoke English at that point. Hearing her journey made me interested in housing and housing insecurity, and it also showed me that it was really her first job that helped break that cycle.

So she got her first job at a Chinese restaurant as a dishwasher and then eventually a hostess. And so she saved up a little bit of money, rented her first apartment, went back to school, and eventually became an entrepreneur herself. And so I could see the ripple effects that jobs had on housing and housing insecurity.

So I was just interested in all these different things, but it was really when I started volunteering and helping out at that local youth shelter that I began to hear from the young adults who were staying there that they just really wanted to work. They were excited to be of use to their communities, but they kept getting rejection after rejection after rejection. And so it piqued my interest into OK, this is a really fascinating problem because you have young people who want to work, and there are many jobs out there and yet there's this disconnect.

And so me and my co-founder, Connor Schoen, we started Breaktime really to solve that issue.

It's important to recognize that homelessness is really a spectrum. And so when you think of someone experiencing homelessness, we may all have this stereotypical view of what that person may look like, what they're going through, how they got there. But really, there are all different kinds of homelessness experiences, unfortunately. And so those can range from people who are sleeping rough, sleeping on the streets, to people who maybe are couch surfing with friends, for example.

And the reasons why people become homeless again are just as diverse. But for young adults experiencing homelessness, the vast majority of them, around 80% do become homeless due to some sort of family conflict. So that can be some sort of abuse, it can be a young person being kicked out of their homes or not feeling safe in their homes because they've come out as LGBTQ. The majority of young adults experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ, and so there's a clear overlap in intersectionality within the population. And unfortunately, a lot of those young people have been forced to make it in the world on their own without the support of their families.

I think a lot of people want to solve problems but they don't spend the time to diagnose the true roots of the problem. And often, that's very challenging and takes a lot of time.

And I'll just give one example for how we went about that at Breaktime is we started with just thinking about homelessness more broadly and then kind of one layer down and looked at young adult homelessness, and then we look at the causes of young adult homelessness. But we also look at, what perpetuates young adult homelessness? And we just asked, why? And we learned about the importance of jobs and the challenges young people faced in getting jobs. And then we asked why about that? Why is that the case?

And we got one layer deeper and saw that young adults want to work but they faced stigma in the workplace. Maybe they didn't have the right resume or experiences.

BONNIE WILLISON: So I wanted to understand more about the root causes of homelessness because I know it's such a complex issue. So I sat down with Dr. MyDzung Chu and researcher, April Ballard.

MYDZUNG CHU: My name is MyDzung Chu, I'm an assistant professor at Tufts Medical Center in the department of medicine. I study social and structural determinants of health specifically in the built environment. So the home, the neighborhood, the workplace. Specifically interested in these issues within Asian and immigrant communities.

I'm also the director of ADAPT coalition at the Tufts Clinical Translational Science Institute. And ADAPT aims for addressing disparities in Asian populations through translational research. And that is a community academic coalition to address community prioritized concerns that range from issues like gentrification happening in Chinatown to other health outcomes like mental health.

APRIL BALLARD: So my name is April Ballard, I'm a fifth year doctoral candidate in the Environmental Health Sciences program at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. I specifically work on water sanitation and hygiene research both domestically in urban and rural areas, but also internationally in Latin America.

So I've been working with people experiencing homelessness and people who use drugs for the last five years and spend a lot of time thinking about how we can reduce or eliminate harms that they experience so that they can live healthy lives. I'm kind of focused on pragmatic and human-centered approaches that address people's problems right now in hopes that we have long-term efforts that can then also impact their life down the road.

There are tons of policies that are really preventing people of color, especially Black people, from having safe and secure housing. And so I think one really good example-- and by good, I mean not good example, actually started in World War two which we're still seeing the impacts of, and this was a national issue. So not even just at a state level, where the Federal Housing Administration actually prevented Black veterans from obtaining mortgages.

Essentially, they didn't write that specifically but they made it so that banks and government viewed Black veterans as at higher risk for loans. This was known as the GI Bill, which was created in the 40s and lasted through the 60s. But it meant not only that black veterans couldn't get loans, but that anyone who was doing local development actually had to write in their policies that they wouldn't sell properties to people of color.

And so this obviously had huge effects at the time as far as inequities in housing. But if we think about our own families and where we're at currently, as a person and where our family has come from, we can see today that generational wealth and our ability to move within or not move within a class is really influenced by that.

MYDZUNG CHU: Yeah, that's a really important historical example of how historical policies really shaped current day. And honestly, it wasn't that long ago. 60, 70 years ago that that has happened, so within one generation. So from policies and thinking about going back to the displacement of Native Americans and Indigenous communities from their home really set the precedent of saying that, we can forcibly remove folks from their land to create opportunities in home ownership or other residents.

That happened in the history but a lot of policies and practices operating today that it's rooted in institutional racism. So thinking about our zoning laws today, how the majority of cities and towns and in Massachusetts, the zoning are for single family houses. And so if you're thinking about immigrant communities where a lot of multigenerational households prefer to live in larger homes aren't thinking of providing affordable housing, just that barrier to having to apply for zoning for multi families or apartments, the additional administrative burden to get to that point really limits how fast and the supply of affordable housing that we can provide across the state and across the country.

And there's significant housing discrimination now to Black, Brown, Asian-Americans that have been documented. I know HUD published a study several years ago to say that compared to White residents looking for housing, Black, Brown, Asian residents are less likely to be shown properties. So I think discrimination operates at the institutional level and also at the interpersonal level.

BONNIE WILLISON: So now we're going to take a trip to Portland, because we got the chance to talk to Lisa and Ibrahim who do important community activism, and they have experienced houseless themselves.

LISA FAY: I'm Lisa Fay, I'm a community researcher and organizer. I've worked within the houseless community for many years, also experienced houseless sense myself and have sat on the board of Right 2 Survive and been involved in the Resting Safe project.

IBRAHIM MUBARAK: OK, I'm Ibrahim Mubarak, co-founder and founder of Right 2 Survive and Right 2 Dream Too and Dignity Village. I'm the executive director of Right 2 Survive at the moment, and I sit on the board of WRAP, Western Regional Advocacy Project as the chairperson.

And I've been homeless off and on for 25 years, but I've been inside for the last 10 years. But sleeping outside also so I can get the feel and aura that's hanging around what's happening to the houseless people. Not just by hearsay but by experience.

LISA FAY: Yes, we work to build tiny house communities or rest areas across the country. We are involved in environmental justice for the houseless community, where our waterways are affected and air pollution, soil pollution are also projects that we have our hands in.

IBRAHIM MUBARAK: I'm also in research but I do direct outreach. I'm direct outreach coordinator, and that's why I was explaining to you earlier before why I stay outside, maybe three days a week sometimes in a tent and go through what they go through.

BONNIE WILLISON: Even though it's unfortunate, people tend to hold powerful stereotypes that are ingrained in us. And Ibrahim experienced this firsthand when he became homeless.

**IBRAHIM
MUBARAK:**

I went through a bad divorce and I lost everything, and I lived on the street. And I saw and I witnessed things that made me cry. And it's hard to make me cry. It made me cry the way America is treating it's citizen, it's people, and they just don't care. And even people are going to school for sociology, and they get their degrees and hanging on the wall. They even treat the homeless people like less than a human.

And so I got involved because I have an education, a cognitive education. I would go and help the people that didn't and the way they were talked to and they were treated. So I quit my job, I was an aerospace technician and then live on the street. And everybody, even my family thought I need to go to a psychiatrist to do something like that.

And then I realized that to me, the real people are there on the ground because they have nothing else. But what they got to give, what they got to take, their life themselves. And so they utilize their survival instincts to stay alive here in this country.

I wanted to get involved and show them another route on how you vote for these people. You don't work for these politicians, they work for you. So you go tell them what you're in need of, and you show it. You can't do it one by one, you have to do it in the mass.

So a friend of mine, Jack Tafari, JP Cupp who now is called Collard Greens and Tim Brown, we got together. Jack was a Rastafarian, Tim was a Christian, Baptist, I'm Muslim and JP at the time of the end of Christ. So we all get together and show how we all had this common need. And in unity, there's a community. And we developed the first tiny house sanctioned village in this country called Dignity Village. And I left there and went on and built Right 2 Survive, which is an organization built by homeless people for homeless people and operated by homeless people.

And out of that came right to dream two. And both those tiny house villages is still going. I think the village we're at 25 years now.

LISA FAY:

almost 30 years now.

**IBRAHIM
MUBARAK:**

30 years and Right 2 Dream, 10 years.

LISA FAY:

It must be noted that the houseless community was living along a Superfund site that goes right through downtown Portland, the Willamette River. There's six miles of the Willamette River that is considered so toxic that the government classified as a Superfund site.

**IBRAHIM
MUBARAK:**

That's how we got in with volunteer foundation. I love that foundation. They're the foundation that's my heart. They also was with the mindset that houseless people ruin their environment.

Portland Harvard community coalition and volunteer, we got together to prove that this not the homeless people. And we took out video and did films of the water and of the land where we saw a mutation of fish and tadpoles, how the homeless people was feeding on the land, growing vegetables and stuff so they can eat because they can come and sit-in and eat that was pushed out to the side. And their teeth were falling out, their hair was being pulled out, the dogs, were having spots on their body. And it was because they were utilizing the water to grow vegetables to drink and cook.

We took this film and we showed them this film and everybody looked at it. They couldn't believe it, that this was happening. Because what's in the water, gets in the land, gets in the vegetable. So they were really eating toxic vegetables and drinking toxic water. I know a lot of you don't like when they say that word toxic, because that's a gun but that's the truth.

LISA FAY: What we've been able to do with Right 2 Survive is bring houseless people as sit at the table. We talked with lawyers from the government, from the federal government, the state government, the EPA, different bureaus and departments from the mayor's office, from the governor's office, from community stakeholders, their big business where houseless people wouldn't have a voice, wouldn't be able to say, yeah, you're polluting my water too, and I live here. And I want something done.

So with all Ibrahim's efforts and Right 2 Survive efforts, we're aligning houseless communities with stakeholders for our cities. Not just in Portland but across the country.

BONNIE WILLISON: Houseless people are very vulnerable to any environmental or climate issue. Lisa and Ibrahim describe some of the conditions houseless people must bear and how this affects their overall health.

LISA FAY: A big example here is when wildfire season hits. It might be hundreds of miles away, but the smoke from the fires. And a couple of years ago, even the embers were still coming into town. And houseless people aren't necessarily able to get masks to cover their mouths or get indoors when the air quality is so bad that it says, do not go outside For if you have any type of breathing problems.

The harsh winter affects houseless people. Not everybody knows how to keep warm and build a structure to get away from the wind and the snow and the chronic rain here. Mold is a big issue that is affecting everybody. Whenever there's moisture, you get mold which causes respiratory problems. Cars, pollution from cars is a big factor when you're living outside and breathing in that carbon all the time. From the cars and the buses and the tractor trailers, they're on the road. You're not just getting gasoline, you're getting diesel particulates and you're getting dirt and dust that comes up off the roads.

IBRAHIM MUBARAK: And a lot of things that in the heat of the moment, you do what you're comfortable, what you're used to doing. And so a lot of people, nothing held against them, forget about the houseless community because they think about themselves and they have to move in a house where if it's like this, it's saying 2,125 degrees, we can go in the air conditioning. Sit back, make some cooling laying popcorn and watch a good movie.

What do the houseless people have? Still that heat. And they just now start developing cooling centers. Because of the things that Right 2 Survive and WRAP, Western Regional Advocacy Project put down on the protests and the good work that they've done. When it rains and rains and rains, the houseless people don't have the freedom or the luxury of a washer and dryer. So a lot of them walk around in wet clothes. Even I caught walking pneumonia at one time.

And even using the restroom, there's one lady who wrote a nice poem about six years ago, and it stuck with me, always stayed with me. And until I have an interview, I'm going to use that poem. I don't know who wrote it, but it touched my heart.

And she said, "I live what? Three blocks away from porta potty, and I got to go. But can I make it? If I don't make it, I go on myself. If I make it, will the door be locked, somebody else using it. And then if I go on myself, how would I wash my clothes? How would I take a shower? There's nothing left." And we don't think about those things that's coming to us.

LISA FAY: We take for granted.

IBRAHIM
MUBARAK: We take for granted. Then an outreach coordinator, you see reality.

BONNIE
WILLISON: Lisa also shares a story about a friend named Roy.

LISA FAY: Another inspiring story is from a friend of ours that passed away, Roy Pesca.

IBRAHIM
MUBARAK: Oh, yeah.

LISA FAY: He was a fisher, a local fisherman. He grew up in the Portland area and fishing was a way of supplementing his dietary needs for himself and his family. And he had been houseless on and off for like 40 years. When he found out that there was toxic levels of pollution in the water and there was over 157 different chemicals that caused cancer and birth defects in the water that he had been fishing out of for most of those 40 years and could have very well led to the cancer that ended up killing him, he became very active with Resting Safe and Right 2 Survive in Portland Harbor Community Coalition.

Here's a houseless person that has cancer that could have only been thinking about making sure he gets his next chemotherapy. But no, he took on a two-year campaign the last two years of his life to make sure that the houseless voice was heard when dealing with the toxins and pollutions and how toxic the fish was that even small children, as young as two years old were eating this river and bringing it to a statewide spotlight.

BONNIE
WILLISON: Ibrahim and Lisa also shared some of their hopes for the future. They hope to see a more educated, respectful, and caring society with more affordable housing for people.

IBRAHIM
MUBARAK: I would like to see what we learn and taught in schools. They teach everybody in this country, I was 16 and I'm going to get a driving permit. Why can't they teach everybody in this country some new survival skill, how to live off the nickel. I think that's what we want to go back to, anyway. Nature you're going to kick our ass if we don't read that careful. If we don't learn how to live off the land and respect everybody, humanity is going to fall.

We need to learn to live with differences. We haven't learned that yet. Because that person is different, don't mean that person is bad.

LISA FAY: I would like to see for the future a system of government where it's working with the private sector to build different types of affordable housing where everybody who wants a house can have a house or apartment, some place indoors that they can call their home and feel safe and know that it's not going to be swept away from them in a citywide sweep of cleaning up an area. It's their structure, they have their own domain over it.

IBRAHIM
MUBARAK: There's no real monsters but capitalism, that's only monster.

LISA FAY: Capitalism indeed.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Right now, I'm working as a researcher for University of Maryland and the Resting Safe project. And we're collecting spider webs and creating a spider sensor. Basically, it's taking an academic level and making it a basic opportunity for anybody in the community to be able to collect spider webs and learn what type of pollutants are in the environment within their own area that they live.

ERIN GOODLING: So with the Resting Safe project, one thing that we've been working on is there's a researcher who previously was at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, they're now with an environmental justice group in North Carolina. And Chris is an expert on spiders and spider webs. And air pollution is something that people living unhoused are dealing with all the time, right? Just being near freeways, being in more industrial parts of town, being in places where a wildfire is happening.

And Chris helped us realize these are particulate matter and heavy metals in different kinds of contaminants settle on spider webs. And that collecting spider webs and testing them, there are a lot fewer barriers than putting up really expensive air sensors that can get broken or stolen.

BONNIE WILLISON: That's Erin Goodling, a community researcher in Portland. She actually is the person who introduced us to Lisa and Ibrahim.

IBRAHIM MUBARAK: Now what Lisa just explained to you, try explain that to some houseless people on the street worried about their next meal, and they want to know, why are you studying spider web? And I said because spider web, it's in bushes on a tree and the wind going through them. And everything that's in the wind particles and stuff gets stuck on the spider web. So you can see what kind of pollution that you're breathing in that area.

And you can also use this not just to tell the government that they polluting the air but if you want to move in a certain particular area by house stuff, you can use that same format and say no, this house is not conducive for us to living.

LISA FAY: And it's also good for low income neighborhoods that are built next to industry and they have smokestacks that are burning 24 hours a day that are emitting toxic chemicals and lead and other particulates that come raining down into your neighborhood and community. And you don't know why your child has asthma or there's birth defects or a high rise in certain types of cancers in your neighborhood. Well, you can find this out through the spider web.

IBRAHIM MUBARAK: And you can take that Grecian myth that the houseless people are polluting our airways, our water, and our land. Because we only living by means, by the means they let us live off. But the real criminal is the government and the people that own these factories where they really pollute it. You can't blame that on houseless people, because they don't have the radiation that come off the smokestacks and stuff like that.

I always put people on the bottom of the totem pole but now, the bottom of the totem pole is pointing up back at them, and we have proof.

**ERIN
GOODLING:**

So one of the parts of our protocol is that we're supposed to tap a spiderweb, like look for these certain kinds of webs that are more horizontal. So either sheet webs or funnel webs, and then tap the web to get a spider to scurry away so that you don't cause it any harm. And then you kind of spiral up the web using like a clean pencil or a straw or something like that and slide it off and put it into a plastic bag and then send it to Chris in the lab to analyze it.

People who are unhoused are doing this web collection. And everybody always says, well, what happens to the spider then? Aren't we just like displacing spiders the same way that homeless people get displaced? Wait, I'm collecting the spider web and I'm ruining their home so that I can know more about air pollution, and I'm worried about getting displaced and getting evicted and getting swept and yet here I am doing it to the spider. And so it's a question that's come up like many times, not just once. People are fully aware of that irony.

The fact that people are concerned about not displacing spiders, I think just says a lot about people's humanity and people's sense of trying to do what's right and what's just and this kind of interspecies connections that we can have. And we've learned that spiders typically will respond their website in the same place that they previously had made one. And if that gets ruined, they'll do it again. They're kind of territorial in that sense.

And one thing that Chris helped us learn is that if you do displace a spider in order to collect the web to send it in, you can give it like an energetic offering. You might catch a fly and give it to the spider or whatnot, and that's approximately the amount of calories that it takes for the spider to re-spin the web. And so that's something that some folks in our group have been trying to do. And I think that's just a really beautiful. Lesson for all of us thinking about reciprocity and thinking about how we treat each other and how we treat the land and the water.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:**

When we got in touch with Erin, she sent us this zine that she made. It was a really beautifully illustrated booklet and really well-written, and it was about fire and houselessness. And she made it while she was working on a project with Resting Safe.

**ERIN
GOODLING:**

Yeah, with the Resting Safe project, one of the things that we did is we interviewed about 50 people from different homeless communities across the US. We interviewed folks by phone and asked what kinds of environmental justice issues they were facing, what kinds of environmental hazards they were dealing with.

And one of the topics that rose to the top was fire. And fire of all different sorts, just like basic using fire to cook and stay warm and the dangers of just using an open flame to do that or the potential dangers I guess. And we also heard about arson, that a lot of folks were living unhoused. People in the neighborhood or whatnot aren't happy about having folks living in tents on their block, and an arson is definitely something that unfortunately comes up more and more.

And then with climate change, we have just wildfire. More and more something that everybody is dealing with but people who are living unhoused, they can't just close their door when wildfire smoke is really dangerous. I think we had last a couple of summers ago here in the Northwest, the air quality index was around 500, which is I think basically as high as it's measured. And it was the worst air quality in the world for a stretch of time. And so people who are living in that smoke, it's really dangerous.

I currently am working with a group of folks from an activist organization here in Portland called Right 2 Survive. It was founded just in large part because they're people who are living on the streets, living in cars, doubled up in motels, tripled in apartments, just precariously housed folks. But especially people living on the streets get told to move over and over and over and become criminalized, meaning cited, fined, arrested, hassled, just for conducting basic survival activities in public space. Things like sleeping, eating, resting, sitting, standing, things that just humans do as humans, as people who take up space and who are trying to stay alive. And so the Right 2 Survive is really concerned about trying to reduce criminalization of folks who are surviving and living on the streets.

People get cited for public urination kind of often. And in Portland, the most recent data I have is a little outdated now but in 2017, over half of the arrests in Portland were people living unhoused. And of those arrests, I think over 80% were for just low level survival crimes.

So folks who are living unhoused are exposed to all kinds of impacts of climate change. But what I think that a lot of folks miss is thinking back through some of the more root causes of homelessness, root causes of climate change, things like people are living in floodplains because they're criminalized and pushed out of more central city areas or more residential areas. And people are homeless because we live in a society that treats housing like a commodity rather than a basic human right.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

BONNIE WILLISON: So by now we've talked to guests from Boston, from Portland, all across the US. And we wanted to bring it back to the Midwest to the Great Lakes region to here in Madison. So we contacted this organization called Porch Light that provides shelter and resources for people experiencing homelessness. And we got the chance to speak to Karla Thennes.

KARLA THENNES: So Porch Light is the largest provider of affordable housing and services to homeless people here in Dane County. I have been with the organization for 31 years. I started as an intern at UW Madison, just like you. And then five years ago, I became the executive director.

So our mission is to not just shelter folks but to move them into affordable permanent housing and to provide wraparound services and help them to move on in their lives to the point where they don't need our services, that they're sustained and independent. But we also provide services at different points in people's lives, whether it's they're on the streets, they're in the shelter, maybe they're in housing but they're really struggling. So we try to offer different services that kind of meet people where they're at.

BONNIE WILLISON: I feel like having this type of role in an organization like this and Karla doing it since she was a teenager, I thought, wow, this must be so fulfilling to be able to see that you are making a difference and doing good in your community. So I asked Karla, "How do you feel at the end of your workday?" And like most people she said she is--

KARLA THENNES: Tired. Yes, I love my job. I mean, you would never do something for 31 years if you didn't love it. I will still have folks who are homeless or in other programs in the community who will see me on State Street and remember me from 30 years ago. We're moving somebody into our housing next week that I remember from 30 years ago, it's really about the relationships. You get to know people, their struggles, their barriers, and then triumphs, of course. And so at the end of the day, that's what's important.

I've got of course, a husband and three kids and a good life there, but I feel like I spend most of my day at work. 40 plus hours a week. And so it's important to have a job that's meaningful.

BONNIE
WILLISON: I think it's common to wonder, at least for someone who is in a secure housing position, it's easy to wonder how houseless people got to where they are at this point in life and what caused them to be homeless? So we asked Karla about some of the people that she knows.

KARLA
THENNES: It's never one thing. It's multiple barriers, it's multiple issues which makes getting out of that situation much harder. Like, if I just needed a good paying job, eventually, I could get a good paying job. But it's not that. So there's mental health issues.

I would say reporting probably about 30% of the homeless folks have mental health issues, but that's all self report. And I would say it's much, much higher than that. Substance abuse issues, that is a common threat. Often, people who are suffering from both, they have a mental illness and they have an alcohol or drug problem. And it's next to impossible to stay sober, to stay compliant on your meds while sleeping on the streets, while being in a homeless shelter housing, affordable housing.

My oldest son will be a junior at La Crosse. And he's just like, oh, when I graduate, I want to live in Madison. So I'm like, you can't afford to live in Madison. My son from a middle class family cannot afford to live in Madison, let alone the folks that we deal with that income is 30% of county median income. And even port side, we have 375 units of housing which we rent to folks, that's not even a debt.

So in that housing I was describing to you where our offices are in Brook Street, we have a year waiting list. The rooms are \$300. Super affordable, but it's permanent. Why would you move out? And so literally unless somebody gets a better job or increases their income somehow or dies, you don't have an opening. And so there's just not enough affordable housing for folks. It's kind of all that stuff wrap together, which is what's needed and what's lacking at the same time.

BONNIE
WILLISON: Karla had some pretty inspiring stories about some of the people that she's worked with throughout the years. First, let's hear the story about Marc.

KARLA
THENNES: So Marc, born and raised by his dad in Wisconsin. He was a big football player, was the captain of his high school football team in McFarland, got a scholarship to play football at UW La Crosse. Went off to UW La Crosse, where he started having symptoms of a mental illness, which is very common. 20 to 23 is really that age that pretty severe mental illnesses start, schizophrenia. He has schizoaffective disorder. His mother had a mental illness, so there's a history in his family.

So he was at UW La Crosse for probably about a year. As soon as his symptoms started, a lot of voices, and he started drinking, which is very common to kind of tamper the voices in his head. It's easier to be drinking and shut all that out. And so all of those behaviors led him back to Madison where he was homeless and went to the men's shelter.

One of my first jobs after being an intern was I was a case manager for our group home, and Marc out to our group home 28 years ago and lived there for two years. And he remembers me being his social worker, and I certainly remember him being his client. He's a big guy, like, 6' 5" but he's just a teddy bear. He's just the nicest man ever.

And I remember moving him out into housing in Madison while he worked on his sobriety, while he got stable. And so he now has been housed in the community. He's probably in his fourth different place. And he has been part of my life and my husband and children's life for the past 20 years. I just said, Marcus, there's at some point after 30 years that you're no longer my client. You have lived in Porch Light housing, you have lived in our housing for 28 years.

I said, "You're just my friend." My husband and oldest kid have moved him into every apartment he's ever lived in. If he needs something fixed, my husband will go over there and fix it. I take him to all these every week. We go grocery shopping together. Every week I visit him. Like, he truly has become this part of our lives.

BONNIE

And now, we get to know Bob.

WILLISON:

KARLA

THENNES:

So Bob had a wonderful life, he was a chef, he had owned his own house, he had a wife. And I don't know if it comes with the chef world, but you drink while you cook, you're laid up with the bartenders and the restaurant and you all drink together. Well, he started a very serious drinking problem. Eventually, it got out of control and his wife divorced him. He hadn't seen his kids, went with the mom. He lost his house, lost his job.

And for most people in that lifestyle, you don't just end up in the men's homeless shelter. He went to treatment, he had some high school buddies he was able to stay at. Like, there was people. Bob is not going to go from losing his house to living in a homeless shelter. So you stay at your uncle's, you stay at your mom's, you stay at your best friends, until you've worn out your welcome. And that can be a year, it could be two, could be five. But eventually, you don't get sober. You're wearing out your welcome.

So he wore out his welcome and he ended up in our shelter. And we don't have the program anymore, but we used to have this program that's called a Sober Living Program. And you had to prove you were staying sober and you got subsidized rent, really nice efficiency apartment, lots of support. Well, Bob kind of went in there like the attitude of you're all a bunch of homeless drunks. I am this middle class guy who's had the house, the wife, the jobs, I just need to get my act together and I'll be fine.

So of course, that's not the attitude you have when you're trying to get sober. And in the end, they're all homeless drunks. And so he wasn't doing the program, he wasn't going to meetings, he wasn't meeting with his mentor, he wasn't staying sober, but he was relapsing, relapsing, relapsing. So it's finally a meeting. You get voted in or out of the program by the other residents. And he had to sit there and listen to them all talk about how he was not taking care of himself, how he was not taking care of the other people in the program, how he was sabotaging everything, and they booted him out.

Later, he talks about how humbling and devastating that was. But really, it was his rock bottom, right? He said it was the best thing that ever happened to him. So he got some more help, he kind of changed his mindset. And I don't know, maybe a year later, he got back into the program, was a rock star, did great, got back into working, eventually became a mentor in the program, like really gave it his all and tried and had all of the supports.

He eventually got a job at the Kohl center, like super entry level, like dishwasher, that kind of thing. But they certainly quickly realized he had the skills to be more than a dishwasher. So he kind of worked his way up through the ranks of the Kohl center and eventually was a chef at the Kohl Center so that's got to be 20 years ago.

And so eventually, Bob reached out and he's just like, Karla, we are throwing away so much food. He said, Kohl center, Camp Randall, food that all the athletes get throughout the year, especially in the summer with the football team. He just said, we literally just throw it out. Can you use it?

And so we have literally for almost 20 years, three times a week, we have a higher person who drives out. We got a van, got a grant to buy a van. And we bring the big silver trays, they put all the food in the silver trays, have it all ready to go for us. And it supplies food to Safe Haven, which is a day center that we have. We serve two meals there. Like, it's literally 3/4 of the budget is this repurposed food.

So it's a wonderful story of Bob Reed getting his life back on track. He actually remarried his wife. I forgot about that. Once he was sober and able to be back to the man and father that they loved, he was able to get his whole life back together. And so I attribute that to a lot of Bob's hard work. But having the programs and services in the moment that he need them is half of it.

Obviously, shelter isn't the answer, that's not going to solve homelessness. But we're never going to eliminate the need for shelter. The Porch Light shelter started in 87 because two people froze to death on the streets of Madison, when we didn't think we had a homeless problem. And so in the new facility in 2025, there's going to be a huge housing component services, case management staff to help people look for housing. But that has to only be one event. If we don't solve this lack of affordable housing, it doesn't matter all of the services that I can provide here at the shelter if I have no place to put people.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:**

We also asked Karla what we can do as individuals specifically here in Madison, but her advice can really go for anyone anywhere.

**KARLA
THENNES:**

Madison is an amazing community for people who want to help, so we have lots of volunteers, we have lots of volunteer opportunities. We have groups that help with renovating our apartments, they clean them out, they paint, they do landscaping. So there's always volunteer opportunities. There's always opportunities to collect things. We have a whole list on our website. Socks, underwear, t-shirts, personal hygiene items, laundry. So if people want to gather stuff, there's always a list of things that are desperately needed.

Like any time I have a particular need for something-- like a couple of months ago, the men at the shelter, they needed belts. So I put some pictures of belts and put it on our Facebook page, and I got like 75 belts right the next day. People want to help, they just want to know in particular what's needed. And then some people just want to give financially, which is great. But not everybody can do that. And so we have opportunities who want to give up their time, who want to give up their stuff, and who want to give financially.

So every year with our very large staff and our large programs, we need to raise \$1 million just in contributions every year. And so it's a huge number that every year we have met because folks are amazing and generous and know that we're doing good works and that it's needed.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:**

Homelessness is a really big and unwieldy problem. And Karla is doing what she can to help those who are experiencing homelessness in the here and now. In fact, all of our guests, Tony Shu, Lisa Fay, Ibrahim Mubarak, Erin Goodling, MyDzung Chu and April Ballard are all doing important work on that front. But I'm also curious about working to prevent homelessness in the first place. I asked MyDzung and April about the differences between preventing homelessness in the first place and addressing the needs of those experiencing homelessness now.

APRIL BALLARD: The overarching, the main goal, the highest priority. I would say is addressing the root causes of homelessness so that we can end homelessness. And that looks like having affordable housing, having employment opportunities, doing a lot of work around racism and policy. And those are lofty goals. They're incredibly important, and they are what we need to have our sights set on for sure. And I think the majority of our resources need to be going towards that and related to fighting to end homelessness.

In the meantime though, we know that people have real needs. And so my work is really grounded in principles of harm reduction, which come out of the substance use world and that we want to reduce the harms associated with homelessness. One, it's a human rights approach where everyone deserves the right to live a healthy life no matter what characteristics they have, whether that is they're experiencing homelessness, they use drugs, they are unemployed. Everyone has that right, and so we do need to step up to the challenge of meeting the needs of people right now where they're at.

And secondly, the thought is that if we're not addressing those needs, those people are likely to have higher rates of mortality and that they could never eventually become housed. And so harm reduction is really just trying to give people the resources that they need to live the day to day in hopes that they can be healthy and then also get to whatever goal they may have, which could be housing in this case.

MYDZUNG CHU: So for the housing stock, I think all of those people talk about supply and demand, and I think increasing the affordable housing supply would really be important to address those that are housing insecure. But also think about the use of public lands for public good is this really important mantra that I learned through community organizing in Dorchester, where the city owns a lot of land. It could be parking lots or the city could encourage private institutions to give their land, like, land that they might not be using back to the community.

There's examples in Boston and the greater Boston through the Boston community land trust and then Chinatown community land trust in which they've been able to buy back land and make it permanently affordable through a 99-year lease. So I think we need to take these initiatives in cities and towns and scale it up. And what is the responsibility of the federal government to be able to use land in a way that really centers those most in need?

APRIL BALLARD: I think what brings me hope most is honestly community. I have been working with people experiencing homelessness for the past five years, but I started a project here in Atlanta in 2020 as a response to the pandemic. So I was working specifically with people experiencing homelessness to give them access to masks, hand sanitizer, hygiene products, period products, it's called the dignity pack project. And it was just one of so many responses that I saw from the community.

And it was just powerful to really see that people throughout Atlanta and maybe even throughout Georgia were seeing the ways in which our systems were failing and were not working for people, and they were advocating for change but they were also taking care of each other in the mean time. And I think mutual aid has really been increasing at least in Atlanta, I'm sure in other parts of the US as well.

And I think that the creativity and the passion that comes from the mutual aid movement where we're redistributing our resources for the communal good is something that we can leverage and we should leverage in our public health practices, in our policy making, in our solutions to homelessness. I think that we do have solutions to this issue, and I think that they're not going to come from the top down I really think they need to come from the bottom up.

MYDZUNG CHU: I think it's really important when you're working with people most impacted to center joy and to center hope in this work. A couple of years ago, I joined Dorchester Not For Sale resident coalition in neighborhood of Boston that really formed together residents in the local community to first increase awareness of all the market rate developments that's happening in Dorchester, but also to say like, hey, we're going to get together and celebrate the power among all of us.

And so pre-pandemic, we would have in-person monthly meetings where there's celebration, there's music, there's conversations happening. We would have child care and language interpretation. And I think just like having ways for folks to connect in spite of all the craziness and the injustices that are happening, at the end of the day, it doesn't take away our resilience and our ability to live and laugh and find joy and live our life and connect with others.

And I think that's really important to bring home to the work of why are we fighting at the end of the day? All this crazy injustice is happening, but it's not going to take away our spirit and the beauty of community.

HALI JAMA: Thank you so much for tuning in to listen to the last episode of this season. We would also like to thank all our guests for contributing their expertise on all these subjects. You can find more information and donation links in the description below.

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