



Hard questions and important answers about chronic street homelessness in downtown Spokane



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DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

Catholic Charities affirms the dignity of every person, partnering with parishes and the greater community to serve and advocate for those who are vulnerable, bringing stability and hope to people throughout Eastern Washington, especially the most vulnerable in our midst — the homeless.

Rooted in this mission, our legacy of service to our most vulnerable neighbors, regardless of religious affiliation, continually builds a foundation of stability, health and hope.

At the core of homelessness are complex issues, including skyrocketing Spokane rents, a staggering shortage of affordable housing, resistance to new shelters and housing developments in downtown or suburban neighborhoods and, above all, the lack of a cohesive safety net for tens of thousands of people struggling with mental health and substance use disorders. Coupled with the many recent exits from the criminal justice system that have left so many with no other options beyond living on the street, these problems have caused homelessness in our city.

Catholic Charities–operated programs are designed to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place. We also offer a wide range of sizes and types of homeless shelters and homeless housing so that individuals and families who do experience homelessness have somewhere to turn to regardless of who they are or why or how they come to us.

Our homeless shelters offer a safe haven, as well as concentrated services, to help patrons stabilize their lives and achieve their goals. We build apartments for the homeless with supportive services on-site so that each homeless shelter resident eventually has some place to live once we can get them stabilized. Once our homeless shelter clients are moved in to our permanent housing, we provide a massive array of services to make sure they maintain their housing long-term and do not slip back into homelessness.

Catholic Charities is pleased to share the following information that hopefully answers many of the toughest questions we are hearing about homelessness in general and provides information about our homeless shelters and homeless housing services.

Sincerely,



Rob McCann
President & CEO
Catholic Charities Eastern Washington

We believe that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being has value and deserves the basic human dignity of a meal, a bed, a shower and a toilet.

Rob McCann
President & CEO

Can Spokane end homelessness?

It is unlikely that we can ever “*end*” homelessness. As you are reading this document, somebody is becoming newly homeless. Somebody is fleeing domestic violence or has lost their housing due to unemployment, addiction or mental health issues. Somebody has become homeless due to family trauma or other factors. Somebody has run out their welcome at their last couch surfing spot with friends and family and moved into their car. We likely can’t end homelessness, but we know we can “*solve*” homelessness. Solving homelessness means that every human being should eat, sleep and go to the bathroom indoors and in a safe, warm and clean environment where they can get services that help them to get back on the path to self-sufficiency. We believe that, through a wide range of shelter and housing options, we *can* solve homelessness in Spokane. We *can* make sure that every person in Spokane, at the very least, is eating, sleeping and going to the bathroom indoors.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- Over 80% of our House of Charity and Housing clients were born within 75 miles of Spokane.
- Homeless clients not born here have been in Spokane on average 6.1 years.
- Residents at Donna Hanson Haven have spent (on average) 11.4 years homeless.

Are we attracting more homeless people to Spokane?

It is common to hear the question, “are we attracting more homeless people to Spokane?” The idea that the food is so good at the House of Charity or that the word is out so far and wide about the apartments we have built, that people are coming from all over the United States or outside our region, simply has no basis in logic or data or fact. We survey the patrons who come through the lunch line at the House of Charity each year. We ask two questions. *Where were you born? If you were not born around here, how long have you been homeless in Spokane?* Well over 80% of our patrons were born within 75 miles of downtown Spokane. This is fairly close to the federally mandated, city-collected data on this same measurement. The homeless who were not born here have been here on average 6.1 years. These are *our people*.

From our Catholic Social Teaching perspective, we believe that all human beings are *our people* regardless of where they are from. However, we also know that the majority of our homeless are from around our community. The most recent Catholic Charities apartment complex that was opened last year moved 50 homeless persons off the street and out of shelters and into their own apartment. The average time those 50 men and women had been street homeless in Spokane before they moved in was 11.4 years.

Stories about other cities like Portland or Seattle buying bus passes and plane tickets to send massive numbers of their homeless population to Spokane create a lot of controversy in our community. However, they are simply not accurate, and used to create a sensationalist view intended to create fear and panic. A program called “ticket home” allows for a homeless person in another city to get bus tickets home but only after a one-on-one engagement with a case manager from the departure and arrival cities, as well as verification that there is family member in the arrival city who has agreed to house the person. Of the 300+ bus tickets that have been given out in this national program only *three* have had Spokane as a destination in the past four years.

Where are all the homeless coming from?

There are 50,000+ people living at or below the federal poverty line in our immediate Spokane region. This is what intergenerational poverty looks like. Kids that grow up in unsafe and unstable homes and suffer Adverse Childhood Experiences can often grow up to become unstable adults in need if we don't intervene. This means there are 50,000+ people who may be one lost job, one unexpected medical bill, one broken down car or one unplanned emergency away from being homeless. It means there are 50,000+ people who, due to any moment of crisis or trauma, could end up moving in and couch surfing with friends and family. It means there are 50,000+ people who will eventually run out their welcome at all the places they might couch surf over the span of many months or even years and at some point will find themselves moving into their car. When their car breaks down or is towed away for some reason, they will find themselves on the street or in a shelter if they are lucky. These 50,000+ people are many of the persons and families who continually back fill the homeless population. In addition, people getting out of jail with no place to go and senior citizens or families who can't afford rent increases are all part of this continual flow as well. Rents have increased in Spokane 50% in the past 7 years, squeezing many of these 50,000 people out of housing and into homelessness.

The growing opioid crisis and how quickly that particular addiction propels people into homelessness also creates homelessness. Untreated mental health issues can also send people into homelessness. Additionally, there are a large number of young persons (aged 15–22) living among those 50,000+ very poor Spokane residents mentioned above whose home life is so unstable, unhealthy, undesirable or unsafe that they prefer to hang around the streets of downtown rather than being at home. This is especially noticeable in downtown during the warmer months, when we see so many young people on bikes who appear to be homeless but in many cases are not.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

We believe every human being deserves the basic dignity and respect of eating, sleeping and going to the bathroom indoors. That even includes those who may not be ready or able to work on their mental health or substance abuse challenges.

Who is allowed to come into the House of Charity?

The House of Charity accepts anyone in any condition as long as they respect the staff, the facility and our rules. There are no drugs, alcohol or weapons allowed in the House of Charity at any time. Anyone found violating these rules is escorted out immediately. Most of our patrons follow our rules because they know we are their last and only option. A large number of the people we see every day in the House of Charity are suffering from either a mental health illness, a substance use illness or both at the same time. This is a heartbreaking and tragic reality for our community. For many of the homeless at the House of Charity, there are no other options for shelter in Spokane because they are still actively struggling with mental health and addiction issues.

At Catholic Charities we believe that every person should be able to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom indoors. That's why we take anyone in any condition at the House of Charity. It's also why we strongly discourage camping or sleeping outdoors of any kind: in our opinion, homeless people sleeping in tents is not a solution worthy of human dignity. Once tents and camping become allowed, or accepted in our community, we believe that human dignity, safety and health all become diminished. The proliferation of tents in and around downtown creates public health concerns and makes it easier for the small criminal element that attaches and hides with the homeless population to conceal human and drug trafficking and other harmful activities.

Is Catholic Charities making things worse by enabling homeless people who refuse to get treatment for their addiction and mental health issues?

We believe that **every** human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being has value and deserves the basic human dignity of eating, sleeping and going to the bathroom indoors. Every human being means **every** human being, including the ones who perhaps can't stop drinking or using and the ones who can't stay on their meds for their mental health challenges. That's why we shelter *everyone*. Some may think this means we are enabling people to stay trapped in their addictions and mental health challenges. We believe that somebody struggling with addiction or mental health issues, even if they are not willing or able to accept help, *still deserves basic human dignity and still deserves to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom indoors in a safe environment*. If we don't believe that, then what we are saying is people who can't beat their addictions and mental health challenges should simply stay outside and either survive or die on the streets, which only harms them and the entire community even further. Resentment towards fragile, ill people who receive basic human dignity (e.g., food, shelter, showers, a bed to sleep in) or attaching harsh moral judgment as to what is or is not "deserved" is one of the more troubling societal ills of our time. Is the risk that someone who "doesn't deserve it" might receive a meal or a bed or a shower really greater than the risk that somebody silently in need might not get served?

In our Permanent Supportive Housing program for the homeless, we are required, by funding sources, to use the Housing First model as a condition of being given the dollars required to construct and operate our buildings. This means that some homeless persons who may still be struggling with addiction or mental health challenges can and do move into our apartments. After 50+ years of building and operating housing for vulnerable, poor people we have learned that this model is absolutely an effective way to house the homeless. There are multiple other nonprofit organizations in Spokane providing this exact kind of housing for the homeless other than Catholic Charities and all of us do so with considerable success.

Once in our housing, residents are offered a wide range of services on-site, including mental health and substance abuse counseling/assistance. The vast majority of our residents eventually do take advantage of these and many other daily services. For the small number of residents who don't want these services at all, if their behavior strays outside of our house rules and regulations (which often happens if they are not even attempting to stabilize themselves), they are immediately required to accept these services as a condition of keeping their apartment once they are discovered to be breaking our rules.



What would happen if the House of Charity closed?

The belief that if there were no homeless shelters and no apartments at all for the homeless in downtown, homeless persons would “simply disappear, go away or move on” has no basis in experience, fact, common sense or scientific observation of other cities our size that have attempted that path.

The House of Charity serves lunch to 300-400 chronically homeless single adults each day. The federally mandated, City of Spokane Point-in-Time Count of all homeless persons in 2018 reported 310 unsheltered street homeless individuals. The number of chronic, unsheltered street homeless has gone down since 2012, in great part due to Catholic Charities’ building three new 50-unit apartment buildings for chronically homeless individuals. Two more are under construction and slated to open in late 2019. There were 69,608 total bed-nights at the House of Charity in 2018. If House of Charity was not open, those 69,608 instances of *one person sleeping in one of our beds for one night* would have been 69,608 instances of people sleeping in parks, loading docks, alleys, encampments by the river, all over downtown, etc.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- The House of Charity serves lunch to 300-400 chronically homeless single adults each day.
- The City of Spokane’s Point-in-Time Count reported 310 unsheltered street homeless in Spokane in 2018.

What about the criminal activity that is sometimes perpetrated by people who seem to be homeless?

We believe strongly in the dignity and respect of every human person. That means we also believe strongly that all citizens and *all business owners and all our neighbors also deserve dignity and respect as well*. Downtown businesses and organizations deserve to operate without fear of crime or dangerous persons. We believe that part of unconditional love also includes an emphasis on *accountability*. Being mentally ill or being addicted or being homeless should not be a crime. However, we believe that if persons experiencing homelessness are committing crimes against people or property, they must be held accountable by law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

Unfortunately, there is a small group of career criminals that hides itself in and attaches itself to the homeless population in order to prey on homeless people who are easy marks because they are often very ill and very fragile. We regularly report criminal persons who may be homeless (or are just hiding themselves in the homeless population) to the police, and we have zero tolerance for crimes against persons or property. Most of the crime that is attributed to homeless people downtown is not being committed by people who want to come into the House of Charity or who want to live in our apartments at all. They are people who have become bad actors and have engaged themselves in menacing or criminal behavior, ***and we believe that they should be engaged by law enforcement, especially because their victims are most often our own law-abiding, fragile homeless clients***. It’s important to mention here that we believe the Spokane Fire Department and Police Department are the finest in the country. These brave men and women are the best of the best and have been wonderful partners with us for many years. They are affected as much as anyone by homelessness and the effects of homelessness on our downtown.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- Catholic Charities does not tolerate lawlessness. Any person committing a crime against people or property should be engaged by law enforcement and is immediately exited from our programs and services.
- At Catholic Charities we serve close to 70,000 different persons each year in 13 different programs designed to help seniors, children, the disabled, families and individuals from all walks of life. Of those 70,000 approximately 650 are the clients who use the House of Charity and/or live in our homeless single adult housing.

What is the cost of all of this?

The average chronic street homeless super-utilizer can spend anywhere from \$50,000 to \$250,000 per year per person in costs, including police, fire, ambulance, ER, hospital, jail and social services. Alternatively, for less than \$9,000 per year per person, they can live in one of the Catholic Charities permanent supportive housing first apartment buildings. The math is indisputable here: the more homeless people we can put into housing, the fewer homeless people we will see sleeping on the streets of downtown Spokane.

It's \$3,200 per night to be in the hospital. It's \$140 per night to be in jail. The cost per unit at the House of Charity homeless shelter is \$11.28 per person per night. The House of Charity served 182,620 meals in 2018 with a total food budget of less than \$10,000 thanks to donated food from the community.

We had a well-known House of Charity patron who went to the ER 61 times in one year. The next year, we moved him into Fr. Bach Haven, and he went to the ER only twice. This represents savings for tax payers, emergency responders and many others. Most importantly, it represents the ability to save the human dignity of that House of Charity patron.



Are Catholic Charities housing programs for the homeless successful?

“Success” in housing the homeless is often measured by whether or not a street homeless person, once moved from the shelter or the street to a Catholic Charities apartment, is still in their stable housing 2 years later. Our success rate is 93%. The idea that we are simply giving chronically street homeless persons their own apartments and leaving them unsupervised and unsupported to do whatever they want to do is a commonly weaponized fear that some in the community try to promote. It’s simply untrue. We have a wide range of services, staff and security at all of our housing properties, and we hold all of our residents to a very comprehensive set of policies, procedures, rules and regulations. Like any apartment in Spokane, sometimes a very small number of residents make bad choices, and when they do, we take swift action just like any landlord would do. The often encouraged temptation is to focus on or be afraid of the 7% who don’t succeed, as sometimes those are worrisome stories. However, we prefer to focus on the 93% who do succeed.

No barriers are put between people in need and Catholic Charities housing. We don’t require potential residents to be sober or have perfect credit scores to live at our properties. Residents are required to be accountable to themselves and the surrounding community through supporting a safe, peaceful environment for all to enjoy. Here are some of the policies and practices we use in our housing for the homeless to accomplish this goal:

- Residents sign a good neighbor policy, recognizing that they are part of the community and responsible to ensure our neighbors’ use and enjoyment of their property.
- Residents’ actions represent Catholic Charities in our community. Although it is rare, if a resident is arrested for a crime against people or property within two miles of our buildings and we receive a record of arrest from SPD, the resident is subject to eviction.
- When a guest visits one of our residents, they must sign in and be escorted in common areas by the resident host at all times. Additionally, overnight guest visits are limited.
- Residents are engaged on a regular basis by our staff to make sure they have opportunity to connect with services that can improve their wellness and their quality of life. We inspect units quarterly for maintenance purposes and more often if a resident is struggling to maintain their housing.
- If a resident is struggling and violates rules and expectations, we enter into a “risk to tenancy” agreement with them. This agreement provides an opportunity to preserve their housing with conditions that the resident engages with services and support.



Why does Catholic Charities build housing so close to the House of Charity?

We have built four 50-unit apartment communities within the block around the House of Charity. That represents 200 units of permanent supportive housing (meaning there is staff on-site to help the many vulnerable people who live in the building). We have built them there intentionally, and with the City's approval, because it allows very fragile people who are moving into their new apartment to be close to services like mental health, food, public transportation, medical services and stabilizing case management services. These 200 units have created concern that there is too much of a density or concentration of "those people" in one area around the House of Charity. We are deeply concerned with this kind of thinking. People deserve to be able to live close to the services they need and desire. There are over 9,000 units of residential housing in downtown Spokane. We have built 200 units for the homeless. That's not an alarming number. It's barely 2%. We can't arrest our way out of homelessness. We can't find our way out of this by hoping all the homeless will leave town or magically disappear. We can't wish or hope our way out of this — we have to house our way out of it. That's why we build housing at Catholic Charities.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES FACTS TO KNOW:

- There are a total of 9,000 units of residential housing in downtown Spokane. Catholic Charities has built 200 total units for the homeless.

How does Catholic Charities pay for the housing we are building?

All of our apartment complexes for the homeless are funded without a single private donation being asked for or needed. The Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program pays for the majority of the costs of construction with occasional help in small part (10% or less) from the WA State Housing Trust fund or local cities and county funding. We use a wide range of Catholic Charities funds to provide the staffing, services, upkeep and security to all of our buildings. We also embed and co-locate staff from many of our other 13 Catholic Charities programs to provide on-site services of all kinds.



How do we move forward, find solutions and talk about this very hard issue?

In the end, how we see homelessness comes down to what we each believe in our work lives, our faith lives, our home lives, our lives as citizens and our lives as tax payers and community members. Our beliefs come from our own experiences and upbringings, and we have to respect and value each other's ideas and core beliefs even if we don't always agree with them. Certainly there are many sides and views of these complex issues and we don't pretend to have all the answers. Perhaps there are no right or wrong answers at all, just opportunities for dialogue and openness to new ways to approach seemingly impossible problems.

Homelessness will continue to be a controversial lightning rod for all kinds of debate and, yes, even argument. And that has to be ok. It has to be ok that we can disagree but still have a respectful open-minded dialogue. We are always open to the Holy Spirit and collaborative discussions leading us to change. We can't know what changes are the right ones to make without knowing, loving and listening to the heart and soul of those who see things differently than we do.

We know we must be willing to hear alternate viewpoints. We must all be open to talking with each other and listening to each other. We must all be patient and be willing to hear well-intentioned questions even when we don't have perfect or comfortable answers. We should all be willing to find new ways for mutual understandings to be created. But we also ask our community to also please beware. Beware of those who only want to make you afraid of the homeless or those who want to make you angry at the homeless or blame the homeless or blame those who try to serve them. Beware of that trap. It's a trap of negativity and divisiveness. It's always easier to dehumanize another person when you are angry at them or afraid of them. Spokane is an amazing place filled with joy and generosity, and we should never dehumanize anyone. We must welcome all of the hard questions and reasonable, intelligent thoughts of good-hearted people, and we must be open to hearing how we might find ways to serve the homeless differently. We are open to all possibilities and solutions that involve us working together. Together we can find common ground, and common ground always carries the day.



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