

Episode 241 - Dr. Heather Larkin and Amanda Aykanian: Strategies to Advance Service Delivery and Address the Challenges of the Homeless Population: Social Work's Call to Action (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello I'm your host Louanne Bakk and welcome to inSocialWork. National estimates by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development show that on any given night more than half a million individuals in the U.S. are experiencing homelessness. In 2017 homelessness increased for the first time in seven years. Given these findings it's crucial that the social work profession is prepared to meet the challenges of the homeless population and to assume a lead role in addressing the social problem. In the first of a two part podcast our guests Dr. Heather Larkin and Amanda Aykanian discuss strategic initiatives designed to strengthen homeless services and empower the social work profession to assume a lead role in ending homelessness. They begin by providing an overview of how the National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services was developed. Current collaborative efforts that exist across multiple sectors and the center's ties to the Social Work Grand Challenge to End Homelessness be that describe the National Homelessness Social Work Initiative which aims to prepare social work students to practice in the field of homelessness and to advance social work with respect to this issue. The episode concludes by exploring misperceptions about homeless social work practice what it actually means to work in homeless services and how engaging in this area provides opportunities for interconnectivity across all levels of practice. Heather Larkin Ph.D. is an associate professor at the University of Albany and co director of the National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services. Amanda Aykanian is a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany School of Social Welfare and serves as the national center's research and project lead. They were interviewed in April 2018 by Dr. Elizabeth Bowen assistant professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:03:12] Hello my name is Elizabeth Bowen. I'm an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and it is really my pleasure today to be interviewing Dr. Heather Larkin associate professor at the University Albany School of Social Welfare and director of the National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services and Amanda Aykanian a Ph.D. candidate at the Inner City Albany School of Social Work and research and project leader for the National Center. So to start Heather I was wondering if you could tell us about the background of the National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services.

[00:03:49] Sure. Yeah this actually grew out of a long term partnership with the committee on the shelterless in Northern California. I had learned about the Committee on the shelterless back when I was working on my doctoral program at Catholic University. And I had gone out there to study their comprehensive service provision. I began learning about the program. And then when I started at the University at Albany in 2006 I stayed in close contact with the director at the Committee on the shelterless. They were an award winning Homeless Services Agency out in Petaluma California and I was really interested in learning how they pulled all the pieces together in their program. And I was learning from them about the ACE study the Adverse Childhood Experiences Research how they were starting to think about the implications for their programming in staying in contact with them and getting started at the University at Albany. I began doing some research looking at the backgrounds of adverse childhood experiences and service use backgrounds of people experiencing homelessness. So I started in 2006 began this research project in 2007. I collected data in New York and California at some point along the way over several years. I also wrote an article that was sort

of showcasing the comprehensive service provision as a case study example of asynchronous programming at the Committee on the shelterless. So this was just sort of an ongoing interesting bicoastal collaboration. And of course there's learning about homeless services agencies in the capitol region of New York and sharing information back and forth with directors here and the directors out in California that I had been learning from. Interestingly there was a long term donor of Cotts who was not a social worker or homeless service provider it was actually somebody who was from the tech field who was very interested in this relationship and information flow between a school of social work at a university and the Committee on the shelterless and this long term donor was very interested and the Committee on the shelterless is comprehensive programming similar to what had brought me to Cotts this donor was drawn by trying to figure out you know how they were so engaged in the community and so a fact of what they were doing there were an award winning homeless services agency in the executive director there had been the executive director since 1992 and in 2013 decided to step down but wasn't completely retiring. And this long term donor wanted to remain anonymous started to learn a little bit more about the social work profession and wanted to find a way to advance more approaches like this person we're seeing in Cotts. So their comprehensive approach informed kind of a homeless services provision and so that the donor offered to found a national center for excellence in homeless services with an anonymous donation because this person wanted to promote was more of this kind of teamwork and information flow between schools of social work specifically in support of homeless services agencies and wanted to advance these kinds of comprehensive approaches that we're seeing at the Committee on the shelterless and as you and I know there are many innovative examples across the country but that's with this particular donor was interested in. And since when he was familiar with was this relationship between Emory University at Albany and the Committee on the shelterless out there in Petaluma California. And of course I realized right away with wow if this is going to be this is somebody wanting to advance a national center where the specific focus on building these relationships between schools of social work and homeless service agencies and supporting homeless service leaders regardless of whether they were social workers or trained in social work and all that I was going to need to start reaching out to some other schools of social work to create the center as a consortium or collaborative of schools. At that point I'm just becoming an associate professor in that there are many many more people with much more expertise than I out there doing all kinds of research on homelessness around the country and that there were also many more innovative programs to learn about in terms of how do people put together the pieces in different communities for comprehensive approaches to homeless services with the support of our dean and with Amanda immediately coming on board as she is about to start our doctoral program right when we're launching this center. I began to reach out to other schools of social work where I knew folks had been doing research on homelessness that were partnered with homeless service agencies and were really committed to the issue. So we've developed a partnership among some schools of social work. We had a meeting at the Council of Social Work Education that year we started doing some regional symposia around the country in different areas sort of figuring out what worked best in different communities in northern California in particular the homeless service agency leaders out there. We're so excited about the opportunity to be more connected with universities and for universities to really have a center that supported them and kind of taking this on that they decided to create a leadership learning community that was in the fall of 2013. They asked us for two things. One was they asked for a at the time a briefing paper on opportunities from the Affordable Care Act and strengthening homeless services provision and a means to lead that work for us. And then also they were interested in leadership training leadership development in support of their work that included learning of knowledge about aces and comprehensive service provision specifically the restorative entrepreneurial support model. We supported their development of learning community and we've found ways to pull together leadership training and evaluation to lead our evaluation as well so she might want to speak a bit more so that when we post of these things we develop a website at the University at Albany we post these things on our Web site. We started sharing information back and forth among our different schools and then in September of 2014 we heard

from the New York Community Trust. They were actually at that point really interested in doing something more to advance homelessness and social work so to pay more attention to homelessness in social work education. And they were really happy to find that there was already a center started that was supporting this and social work education. So they contacted us invited us to apply for funding for a national homelessness Social Work initiative. Then we applied for that and in doing so we also approached the director of the Council on Social Work Education Darla Coffey and she also said you know we've been wanting to do more about addressing homelessness and social work so you can see the stars were kind of aligning. So we then with the funding from New York Community Trust were able to start a national homelessness Social Work initiative we reached out to many more schools and we also were in partnership with the Council on Social Work Education in carrying this out. I guess that's a good basic overview of how it all started and then we can fill in some more as we go along.

[00:10:59] So I think that's a really great example of collaboration across so many different sectors. So collaboration across disciplines between what agencies are doing and universities and donors and organizations like Council for Social Work Education even collaboration nationally and across geography. And I think you're starting to touch on how the National Homelessness Social Work initiative developed. And I'm wondering if you can say a little more about what it looks like today. So how many schools are part of that and how is it set up and what does the National Initiative do.

[00:11:35] So it's really exciting. You know what can develop through partnerships. You know as I said I've realized if this was going to be something national I wasn't going to be just at the University at Albany. And the reason that this original donor was interested in it was because of the bi coastal relationship and the information sharing. So it just there is so much potential to kind of add to the Innovation Exchange opportunities by reaching out to more folks. One of the things that's been really written I think to all of us is feeling supported in addressing homelessness and being part of this national initiative bringing more opportunities for us to work together but also to share at our universities the fact that this is an important initiative in search work and that what we're doing is contributing to this national initiative and that it's important for social work that really you know it's an ethical obligation. We've always said that that we prioritize the most vulnerable population groups. So the National Homelessness Social Work initiative continued to expand the first year what we did was we added in some more partners from the original group and we asked everybody to do baseline report on what they were already doing in terms of homelessness classes offered field placements in homeless services. Other activities are raised that they were infusing content on homelessness other kinds of policy program partnerships. Just so we could get a sense of where everybody was and then ask each school then to think about their next steps for the following year and then each year engage new schools as partners. And along that too some of the partners sort of simultaneous to starting the National Center and starting the National Homeless the Social Work initiative. Some of the folks who we reached out to become partners with had already started working on the concept paper and submitted the concept paper for the grand challenges and then we know what the grand challenges are coming out and there's one of the grand challenges to the profession is to end homelessness so we're already in the process of addressing that grand challenge. So the National Homelessness Social Work initiative we've asked each school that's partnered with us as we've added in new partners over the years kind of narrowed their baseline content shows us where they're at in terms of all those areas I described. And then to figure out what their next steps are from there and then report back to us. I should also say that with the funding from the New York Community Trust and the involvement of the council that social work education we became much more focused and not seen on a treating leadership paths were social work students both MSW and undergrad into the field of homelessness whereas initially with the initial donor that focus was around the partnership which we maintained that emphasis. Very fitting for Schools of Social Work Of course we have field placements and agency partnerships and stuff all the time. So that original focus was on what can we at universities do to support homeless

service leaders more. We maintain that then with the New York Community Trust funding really looked at how can we create these leadership paths for students in social work and how to how communities are content across our curriculum share information about homeless courses increase field placements for students etc. and now we're at gosh I'd have to count up on our Web site. Please share the Web site which has a list of all of our partner schools. And Amanda might be able to tell you of the top of her head. I think we have like about 20 schools that are involved now and we also along the way with National Homelessness Social Work initiative. We asked some schools to serve as regional leadership hubs. So we've got several schools that are taking leadership roles in their region and then are doing things like sort of identifying regional concerns and organizing with other schools of social work around that in some way in some cases that involves regional networks. I know for example Betsy and Amanda you might want to talk about the regional network in New York and New Jersey that you've been leading the past year and a half or so. So I think it's a good overview of what the National Homelessness Social Work initiative is about who's included. We've got all those partners schools regional hub leaders and then in several areas particularly the New York New Jersey area there's this network of liaison schools and in the first year of the National Homelessness Social Work initiative in the New York area we actually reached out to almost all not all but almost all of the MSW programs in New York State and got them on board as liaison schools. As we moved along some of those liaison schools were so active that we invited them to become partners schools and other areas have kind of looked at that model and figured out what they're going to do in their regions to organize. And I can speak from personal experience here that it's been a very exciting time I think to be a homelessness researcher and educator. It feels like just overly supportive and exciting time to be doing that with the grand challenge going on with of national homelessness Social Work initiative. I just really like that relatively newer researcher. It's really a fantastic opportunity to connect with colleagues all across my region and all across the country that are doing interesting and innovative and exciting things in both homelessness research and in social work education around homelessness. So this work just feels so important and so needed to me.

[00:17:03] So Heather you mentioned the grand challenges and Amanda could you maybe tell us a little bit more about how the national center's work ties in with the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness.

[00:17:14] Heather gave a good introduction in sort of how the two initiatives really emerged around the same time with the National Homeless the Social Work initiative starting right before the grand challenges really launched. The two were the national homelessness Social Work initiative and the grand challenge to end homelessness really kind of came around. At the same time which was great timing in general for sort of building momentum within the field but also as Heather said we had already had these relationships with schools that had been part of the team that pulled together the concept paper for the grand challenge. And then when the Grand Challenge and homelessness was selected and that the two national co-leads of the Grand Challenge and homelessness are Ben Henwood from the University of Southern California and Deborah Padgett from New York University and both of those schools are partner schools of the National Center. And they were partners schools prior to them the Grand Challenge. So we already had this relationship with both both of them. And so it really created a very fertile way of starting a collaboration with the Grand Challenge really staying in contact and communicating around you know what the grand challenge initiative more broadly is up to you as well as what the grand challenge to end homelessness is up to and really you know just two initiatives that have very shared goals and so it's nice to be able to kind of align around around similar interests and similar ultimate goals for the profession and for for homeless services. More broadly I think one of the challenges with the grand the grand challenges that it's somewhat still evolving and not as sort of concretely defined as what the National Homelessness Social Work initiative is at this point because there are still sort of fleshing out their their overall initiative. And it's also not a funded initiative. So

while there are 12 grand challenges and each Grand Challenge has a set of leaders there aren't grant funds or anything that are being passed down to each Grand Challenge to fund their work. One of the things I think that really benefits the Grand Challenge and homelessness is the existence of the National Center and our consortium of schools across the country because it's really created almost like an infrastructure or a mechanism through which the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness goals and objectives can be implemented. So whether that's simply through communicating ideas and priorities whether that's through connecting social work researchers who have shared interests around homelessness or more sort of strategic partnerships for example we wrote a manuscript that was published in *The Journal Families and Society* a couple years ago that talked about it and the Grand Challenge and the way the National Center does that and the National homeless social work initiative does that and we wrote that in partnership with Deborah and I and several other partners that at the center and then more recently I've co-lead the Special Interest Group on Homelessness at the Society for social work and research conference along with Ben and Deborah as well. So trying to do some things that are very clearly connected showing the two entities the National Homelessness Social Work initiative and the Grand Challenge as connected entity is sort of a united front around this topic. So I think you know we're still sort of developing as as the Grand Challenge develops and evolves I think more opportunities will hopefully show themselves. But those are some examples of how we've kind of aligned so far.

[00:20:47] If I Could I just wanna say you know I think our focus is that we just want to do what's going to work best to advance addressing homelessness by social workers and really taking the lead on this to have a true national impact.

[00:21:00] And I'm so appreciative to hear your input that see around you know how you feel this has been valuable for you to participate in and I'm so appreciative of your leadership. And you know there's there are homelessness researchers who have been doing this for many many years who are much more senior than than those of us on this call who've said that it's really a means so much to them to feel validated in the work that they've been persisting in and feeling kind of alone at times. And so I'm really glad that we can figure out as social workers how to come together and organized around this issue and and all of the Grand Challenge themes. And as Amanda said it's evolving and you know I think it's great that we've got this collaborative effort and National Homelessness Social Work initiative in place to address the Grand Challenge and we're all the ones who are leading it together. So we're just I think we're all want to do what's going to work best as of next step.

[00:21:53] Absolutely. And that I think leads to our next topic. So if we are going to achieve the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness. Of course we also need the next generation of students on board whether that's BSW MSW Ph.D. at any level. Sometimes though I think we've talked about how student may have misconceptions or even stereotypes about what homelessness social work really is. So I wanted to ask you what are some of the images or perceptions or stereotypes that students or others may have about doing homelessness social work. And then what actually is homelessness social work.

[00:22:33] Well I guess I'll start now sharing some thoughts about that. I mean immediately when I began as a faculty member in the School of Social Work one of the things that I heard from students when they would get into homelessness field placement was they were worried about not getting enough clinical experience. And I think gosh this is so interesting. I think there's a few forces at play here. One is that as I think we're all aware in the profession there's been a big emphasis on clinical and sort of separating out clinical and macro and people going for clinical licensure there. There tends to be more students choosing to focus on the individual and on psychotherapy and in fact I think that homelessness is really the perfect example of what we could do well with as advanced social workers. It's really an opportunity to bring together our clinical macro and policy

skills. I think that you know I kind of hope that by bringing more attention to addressing homelessness and social work that it can actually help move our field to the next level as we engage more faculty and sort of seeing the connection across categories of concern. It's always the highest risk groups from any category where there's children and families older adults experiencing substance abuse problems violent substance use disorders mental illness et cetera. I think it's a real opportunity to bring all of our social work skills to bear in a more integrated way to help the highest risk groups to be able to truly transform bodies of individuals families communities and promotes societal wellbeing which is what we do as social workers. So I think we went through this stage of breaking things out into categories of focus since separating out clinical macro and policy and people developing specific areas of expertise and in those ways which is great. And I think there's a next step in terms of seeing how it's all connected and integrating those pieces engaging with faculty and students and realizing that they might be fine their focus of concern around be working with children and families or working with older adults or something but that doesn't mean that they're not connected in some way to preventing or addressing homelessness. There's a way that we could kind of infuse the content across the curriculum use this process of homelessness to further integrate our curriculum and really try to reframe how we present learning about homelessness to students as being a more advanced practice skill where they're bringing together clinical macro and policy. And really you all of our work connects and in some way to address preventing or addressing homelessness across social work. And we have this ethical obligation to prioritize the most vulnerable population groups. And there's so many rich examples of how you can and simultaneously use your clinical skills while engaging in community capacity development and policy advocacy and systems change at center all as part of addressing homelessness. So those are some of my thoughts on it and I think it would be great to hear both of your thoughts on this as well.

[00:25:37] I agree with everything that Heather was saying and I think what I think about the sort of perceptions and stereotypes that inform how students think about homelessness it always makes me sort of start with the idea that I don't think students get a lot of exposure to homelessness in general and education coming into a master's program especially. And so I think it's hard for them to understand really what the sort of broader homelessness population looks like or what homeless services looks like. I think a lot of that general stereotype students hold come from the more sort of visual homelessness examples of being you know older men on the street sleeping on park benches or under overpasses. They think of people who are potentially dangerous people who are potentially dirty people who have mental health or substance use concerns. And often I think a perspective that homelessness is self-inflicted and that it is sometimes a choice people are homeless. I hear this all the time from students and nonstudents that people are homeless because they want to be homeless. So I think all that kind of informs what students bring to the classroom around ideas around working with people who were homeless and what level of interest they have for that. I think the other side of things is that we often through homeless services do more to manage homelessness at times than we do to intervene or support individuals experiencing homelessness. So if we think about traditional sort of shelter models that provide housing or or shelter safe shelter warm shelter food and sort of basic may be crisis services but aren't necessarily associated with broad clinical interventions or for intensive case management and we have other mechanisms to use if we think about interactions with the way we use police said. Homelessness is very much a managerial approach to a social problem or a population. Some of it is reframing. For students what homeless services can be and understanding the opportunities for providing more high level services be that clinical very intensive clinical support it's for people who are dealing with things like mental health or trauma symptoms but also providing a range of case management and sort of motivational supportive relationships for people as they transition out of homelessness or into different educational settings or employment settings and things like that. I find that a lot of it is a reframing of what what homeless services is or could be. And I think there are certainly ways of creating experiences that are very much more clinical or advanced in homeless services and I think there are

also realities around that some homeless service settings really probably aren't providing high level services that that sort of me the traditional social worker you know internship model as well I think both those things are true. I mean that depends on the setting. I think the misperceptions people hold I think it's those two things it's misperceptions about the population and also misperceptions about what it actually means to work in homeless services and what homeless services are providing.

[00:28:49] Yeah. Thank you both for sharing your perspective on that. I very much agree and I think it's a shame in a way that these misperceptions do get in the way sometimes of people being interested in working in homeless services when as Heather was saying it's really a great convergence of practice at all levels said micro Meso and Macro it's an opportunity to work in a way that you can work with individuals that you can work at the meso level you can influence policy. All of those things I think tend to be very much connected in the world of homeless services so there's a lot of great opportunities that I think people are potentially missing out on if they just close the door to that area of practice. I always think of something that one of our colleagues in the National Homelessness Social Work initiative said Dan Herman at Hunter College. When we were having this conversation within our New York and New Jersey Regional Network and he said something about that people often may think that homeless services means handing out peanut butter sandwiches and finding people a cot to sleep on and really that is that's not really what it's about. And if it is that's really just the very tip of the iceberg of what it means to practice in homeless services. So I think that means we solve some work to do in terms of dispelling some of those ideas and some of those misperceptions.

[00:30:09] You've been listening to Dr. Heather Larkin and Amanda Ayanian discussion on strategic initiatives designed to strengthen homeless services and advance homeless social work practice. We hope that you will join us for part 2 of this podcast soon. Thank you.

[00:30:37] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.