

Episode 243- 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 2 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 and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello I'm your host Louanne Bakk and welcome to inSocialWork. Given that social justice is a fundamental principle within the social work profession there is an increasing need to heighten attention to homelessness within the curriculum and practice setting expand Homelessness Research and advance effective homeless interventions services and policies. In this second of a two part podcast our guests Dr. Heather Larkin and Amanda Aykanian emphasize how social work research has informed best practices in homeless services and provide examples of current models and programs that are designed to prevent homelessness. Research pertaining to service and policy implications associated with mobility and the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACE scores and homelessness is discussed. They also highlight gaps in knowledge development including the adoption of evidence based practices in real world settings. The episode concludes by describing how to become involved in the National Center for Excellence and homeless services, benefits associated with being part of this important initiative and future work that is needed to sustain and expand efforts to end homelessness. Heather Larkin Ph.D. is an associate professor at the University of Albany and co-director of the National Center for Excellence and 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.

[00:02:51] And that I think brings us to the next question which is one of the exciting things about I think being in the field of homelessness services and being a researcher is this is an area where we can see clear samples of research changing policy and practice and research and forming practice. The huge shift in the field to Housing First models I think is one example of that. So can you tell us a little bit more about how you see research informing best practices in homeless services?

[00:03:20] Sure. Well I think housing first is probably the best example of real advances in research within the homeless services world and how that has really influenced what we do. It's also a great example of a research area that has come predominantly out of Social Work Research which is nice and quite a bit of the homelessness research that has become most prominent in the field of the last decade actually comes out of social work which is which is lovely. Housing First is a good example of how a model can really proliferate both around the country but also internationally it's a model that is addressed and that is that it has been adopted in many countries and something that offers real sort of evidence supported intervention for a specific you know generally high needs and so chronically homeless adults with co-occurring mental health substance use issues or are sort of the typical target population for a Housing First model. But what I like also about housing first more generally is that it also provides some evidence of some broader principles that can be useful at homeless services so thinking about creating low barriers to program entry low barriers to housing and what are often referred to as high barriers to discharge. So in other words making it really easy to get people into a program or get people into housing that making it it's really hard to get people discharged or kicked out of housing making sure that your primary goal is keeping people housed and housing people as quickly as possible and not putting people through processes where they have to demonstrate housing readiness or demonstrate a commitment to a certain service plan or maintain sobriety or abstinence. All of those things have been from a research perspective things that were evidenced in research as part of the successful model and things that have been adopted

through policy and other programs implementation. Another example of a successful model since you mentioned Thea Hermanus critical time intervention is a time limited case management model intended to prevent homelessness when people make being transitions typically from sort of institutional settings to community based settings and that includes transitioning from shelter for example to a housing scenario an apartment or home could also include transitioning from being incarcerated into the community. And the idea behind that model is that you prevent homelessness through a real sort of structured time limited case management approach and that has been a model that's gained quite a bit of attention and has been applied to a variety of different populations both adults and families and is now something that's being integrated into rapid rehousing models sort of adapted to that. That model of rehousing as well.

[00:06:08] There's a whole variety of research smaller pockets I think that inform things that we do so there's quite a bit of research around the social networks for example of homeless youth and how young people experiencing homelessness connect with their peers how they communicate how they share information and how they are interconnected in their communities and how an understanding of that connection can be used to share information for example to reduce risk behaviours or to deliver more targeted intervention approaches. So there's a whole variety I think of a research that that has the potential to inform what we do going forward. At the same time I sort of always have to answer this question I think we have lots of research that we can be proud of and that has really answered a lot of questions and we know a lot about what works when it comes to homelessness. At the same time I think there is real needs around things like understanding how you know research around implementation science so how you take a model like housing first or a model like critical time intervention adopted into a real world setting in a way that's scalable and understanding the sort of implementation and process components of doing that and being able to kind of understand from sort of a program evaluation perspective what changes mean. So for example if you're going to adapt or modify a model what does that mean for outcomes and if you're thinking about fidelity to a practice how does variation in fidelity to a model affect outcomes and I think there's in general a lack of research in that area that we could do essentially as social workers really think about using research in that vein to promote scaling up best practices and really enhancing adoption of these models like a critical time prevention are like a housing first. That's my general position and research at this point.

[00:08:00] I think this is the perfect follow up question to your question about engaging students more you know as Amanda was talking about you know students sort of seeing that services are kind of acting like they're managing people experiencing homelessness and really are often not doing things in a very piecemeal way or just addressing basic needs and not thoroughly incorporating what we know about effective comprehensive approaches to helping people. That one of the things that can help to change that would be through our increasing partnerships with leaders of homeless services agencies and policymakers. Being able to in a helpful supportive way share information research knowledge from the university into the community to support the translation into practice and institutionalize best practices into our policies but also in that supportive respectful way to learn about what questions the homeless services providers in our communities have and to really pay attention to innovative approaches that emerge and help to bring that practice to research as well. We continue to have some gaps in knowledge development around homelessness that I think may be tied to this issue of sort of breaking things out into categories that we need to figure out a way to do more comprehensive team based kind of research across maybe across disciplines more to break down some of our silos to support the research on Comprehensive Homeless services provision as well and developing these partnerships across schools one of the ideas here is that we're also helping to connect researchers with one another that we're able to engage in more of that collaborative work and it all ties back to the importance of creating these partnerships with policy makers and program directors in our communities again regardless of whether their degrees in social work to find supportive information sharing Innovation Exchange kind of alliances so that we

can really help to enhance the effectiveness of Homeless Services which would also in turn help to make this more interesting I think to students too because it gives them a place where they can see and actually practice implementing things that they're learning across the board in their curriculum. So those are some of my thoughts about it but I also must say briefly that when I had first learned about the ACE study Adverse Childhood Experiences Research it showed that accumulated adversities were related to correlated with these later in life not only mental health substance abuse problems but many other health risk behaviors and serious health problems and what you saw from the original ACE study this very large middle class population was that people with higher ACE scores or more accumulated adversity at an earlier age you started to see more multiple co-occurring problems and I thought isn't this interesting because in social work We've always helped the people who are experiencing multiple co-occurring problems and accumulated adversities and for example if you looked at research on homelessness that had already been done we already knew that people who were experiencing homelessness had more multiple co-occurring challenges. Anecdotally you'll hear from people on the front lines that people have been through many adversities and traumas before the trauma of also experiencing homelessness that really people experiencing homelessness are often incredible survivors. So my interest in extending the ACE research particularly to looking around ACE scores of people experiencing homelessness was to be able to start a conversation about how we could sort of understand that part of what people were presenting with these accumulated adversities and traumas and that we need this really called us to bring services together in a more comprehensive way and to move beyond some of those piecemeal approaches or kind of managing homelessness kind of approaches. My thoughts here was that perhaps stigma would be reduced if we could raise awareness in society about the higher ACE scores among people experiencing homelessness people might be less inclined to say things like "Oh why doesn't that person just get a job I have a job and I work" or something like that to realise "oh wait I'm somebody with an ACE score of zero or one talking about somebody who has an ace for eight or nine would I have even been able to survive what this person has gone through and what are the implications for how we effectively help people who are experiencing homelessness." And my other thought here was that you know the ace research seemed to kind of serve it integrating function by showing that the accumulated adversities earlier on are correlated with these later in life problems that we often treat as separate issues and homeless services are actually in a challenging position of helping people who are experiencing more co-occurring problems and in the worst situations navigate a categorical system of care or fragmented system of care. The ACE research could help to offer a shared language across systems and it could help us to think in a more strings based way about how incredibly resilient people have been and how do we create comprehensive programs that foster that resilience in the programs and in communities and raise awareness in society in general.

[00:13:11] Thank you Heather for sharing about your research and also for your point about the importance of collaboration and community partnerships. I've also very much found that to be the case. When I moved here to Buffalo a couple of years ago I wasn't sure exactly what my research agenda was going to look like but I quickly connected with one of my community partners here the homeless alliance of Western New York. And it was really their staff who brought to my attention this question of what's going on with young adults and are they receiving services in our area so young people aged 18 to 24 who are technically adults but in many ways still developmentally going through the challenges of young adulthood emerging adulthood and does our current service system meet their needs. And it was really my community partners the Homeless Alliance that raised that question because they had a feeling that maybe this population was not being well served and for me as a researcher that was really a starting point into looking into that and doing some research here in Buffalo on that and then also connecting with other researchers who are looking at similar problems or similar issues in their communities across the country and finding that there is some best practices that there is some research and some literature on this. So I just think we can't you know speak to that enough the importance of making sure our research questions are tied with

our communities that it's answering the questions that practitioners want to know. On the topic of research Amanda one of your research interests is geographic mobility of people experiencing homelessness. Can you tell us just a little bit more about that?

[00:14:46] Sure. I am interested in thinking about some of the service and policy implications associated with mobility or transience of people who are currently homeless and there is there is a modest body of literature that looks at sort of describing mobility. So thinking about reasons people move from one place to another frequency with which people move from one place to another and sort of who is more likely to be more mobile and typically mobility is thought of as kind of making large geographic move so crossing city or town lines county lines state lines things like that. There's not a ton of research or really any significant amount of research that looks at sort of why this particular quality or characteristics of people experiencing homelessness should matter does matter or should matter in the context of service design and delivery and policymaking. And so my research has really been kind of trying to unpack that that piece of it. So why as social workers do we care about mobility and what are the implications of that when we think about designing and delivering services or advocating for policy change and those sorts of things. So I did a small study in the capitol region of New York talking to providers that specifically work with homeless service that specifically work in homeless services and work with homeless youth. By talking to them really about how they think about mobility among the youth that they serve both in terms of how they just sort of perceive the behavior. As you know is it positive is it negative. What kinds of things contribute to it. What are the risks associated with it and then more specifically around what it means to provide services to engage youth and to think about policy limitations or facilitators when working with youth who are highly mobile and so that sort of started as a precursor to my dissertation research which is going to be a broader version essentially of that I'm doing a mixed method's study using data from 21 counties in the north northeastern area of New York looking at HMIS data and the way those experiencing homelessness in those counties use services. So essentially comparing folks who use services in one geographic location versus people who use services across multiple counties. So basically people who are service users in the homeless service settings that are located in one county versus people who are had a history of using services in multiple counties and looking at those two groups you know how do those two groups or how are those two groups similar or different from each other in terms of demographic and background characteristics in terms of the kinds of services that they use and the patterns with which they use services and then coupled with that interviewing providers in those communities from both more rural counties and more urban counties so that none of the sort of capital region is it super urban but so the more sort of population dense counties and the less population dense counties. Talking to providers about what some of those same themes from the first study. So what does it mean to work with highly mobile population. What does it mean when we're thinking about the capacity of services to to do outreach to engage to provide services to individuals who are more mobile. And what aspects of the service system or the broader policy landscape and community contribute to mobility both thinking about how service systems create mobility. So for example you know referring to someone from one county to another county for services or how policies or services might limit mobility. So are there policies for example that prevent someone from one county from receiving services in another county if they want to go to that county for example to be closer to friends and family. So that's the sort of broad stroke of the research I'm doing right now around that topic.

[00:18:47] That's really interesting. Thanks for sharing. I think this issue of mobility is kind of a hot topic now especially on a national level. We're hearing a lot about how the west coast is experiencing a real crisis in homelessness. And I think that's raised questions about mobility nationally but also more locally and just like you're saying thinking about New York State how we have counties especially upstate where we have a lot of rural areas we have mid-sized cities like Buffalo and Albany we have smaller cities. We have suburban areas and just how do people

navigate that web of services geographically and how does that affect their mobility and ultimately how does that affect other outcomes. That seems like a big question for the homeless services field and really important to have some research that look at that. So Heather could you tell us if a school is interested in becoming part of the National Center how can they get involved?

[00:19:41] I mean we would just love to engage anybody who's interested in becoming a partner of the National Center. What we've done with the support first of our initial donor and then over the past several years with the support of New York Community Trust is we've been able to give our partners small stipends to participate in the initiative. Now right now we're in our fourth year of the New York Community Trust and we're identifying working with our partners to identify both nationally and regionally and locally a range of different ways to potentially sustain and expand the work. We figured we're not gonna not start it because we have limited funds or don't know how what our next funding source is going to be. This is an important issue we're going to start this and we know other initiatives such as initiatives in social work on aging and child welfare has to start somewhere before they got significant funding later on. So we hope for that significant funding to further support our partners. And at this point new partners we would be engaging you based on the benefit of being part of the Collaborative. What most people have said is that that has been of great value to them regardless of whether they got that small stipend or not because of the collaborative opportunities and the opportunity to work together as part of a national effort. Feeling a sense of validation and support for their work that enhances their strength and their roles and their reach university to. So I would love to hear from anybody who is interested in becoming a partner school. And we can work together on identifying funds to support that as we go along.

[00:21:14] Great thank you. So I think we're at our last question. Maybe you were speaking to this a bit but what's next. What's on the horizon for the National Center.

[00:21:22] Well I guess one piece might be and Amanda can speak to this a little bit more too is you know as we're sort of evolving with the grand challenges and kind of seeing what's going on there what's going to work. We talked about that earlier. Like this kind of initiative and the great challenges kind of developing at the same time and what's going to work best as we evolve and move forward those are things to kind of discover together. And then also this is really important and has the potential to have such a profound impact on our society and improve the overall health of our society if we could reduce and end homelessness. What other profession is going to take that on other than social work where we say right in our code of ethics that we prioritize, we're called to prioritize the most vulnerable disadvantaged oppressed marginalized population groups. We're the ones that need to do this and were for it to work we need to do it together. And so we need some more resources and funding to support that. And so we're just going to keep carrying on and figuring out what works as we move forward and identifying our funders and supporting each other and our work that will include next steps in sharing homelessness course class designs. More and more across different schools online content with one another. We're already doing so much in terms of sharing. The syllabi we have and activities and exercises working together to build some of that knowledge we talked about and to advance next steps in research and being recognized as the workforce to take this on to help our policy leaders to achieve their goals to end homelessness too, to hopefully engage them in investing in our workforce, recognizing that we are really have these aligned goals and are key to helping you applying our skills to how to achieve reductions and ending homelessness and continuing to collaborate with one another in developing partnerships with the policy makers and program leaders community leaders sharing innovations that we're learning about across the nation and maybe doing more research across universities as well. So these are all potential next steps.

[00:23:32] We talk about sort of two sort of products that are on the horizon at least from the National Center. One is that we are writing a textbook for homelessness social work education with

Springer Publishing that will be hopefully published this year and that is designed for social work educators to use it specifically sort of MSW level but certainly has applicability at BSW level as well. And that will include 18 chapters that were led by faculty from our partner schools and in many cases coauthored by their colleagues which include students as well as some community partners so that we are hard at work finalizing and preparing to publish that this year. And then any other thing we were doing this year is collaborating with the Council on Social Work Education to develop a curricular guide for social work educators to teach about homelessness and housing insecurity. We assembled an advisory board of several faculty from our partner schools to inform this process. And if you're familiar with them CSW has curriculum guides right now on gerontological social work and economic well-being. And they're working on a variety of others. And there's homelessness and how housing insecurity as one of the ones that is currently in the works. We've just had a kickoff meeting in person. We went down to CSWE for two days you start developing competency applications so that so applying the CSW competencies to homelessness but housing and security work. So I think those are two examples of the broader goals. Heather was talking about as far as strengthening social work education and sharing curricular tools and resources. The particular guide specifically will have examples reading examples as well as activity and syllabi examples and the textbook will have discussion questions and activities to accompany each chapter. Both of those will be useful for education and curriculum strengthening.

[00:25:36] It's great to hear about those resources. And also I think it's important that there is this momentum continuing from the National Center. To me it seems we're at a point where there's a lot of promise in terms of where we're at with homelessness and in terms of promising practices and policies and I think we actually have come a long way in terms of research in terms of services in terms of policy related to housing and homelessness. But we are at a point where it's still certainly a pressing issue where housing affordability is really at an extremely high I would say crisis level. That's a potential driver of homelessness. There's a lot of uncertainty I think in what is going to happen with the future of funding especially government funding for supportive housing for health care. So it just seems to me that there is opportunity and there's a need for social work leadership. So I think it's just so important that we have a group like the National Center that is there to keep that going and to beat social workers role. So I think that's all for our questions today. Thank you both so much for sharing your time and your research and your experience and your perspectives. Is there anything that either of you would like to say here in closing as we wrap up?

[00:26:50] We appreciate you doing the podcast so this was great and it was great talking with both of you too. I'll be curious if we hear from people following up from the podcast and maybe have some opportunities to do some nextstep podcasts in the future.

[00:27:04] Definitely.

[00:27:06] Yeah. Yeah I was just say thank you as well Betsy for your leadership in our regional network and in New York and New Jersey but also coming up with the idea to do this podcast it was a great idea I think.

[00:27:18] You've been listening to Dr. Heather Larkin and Amanda Aykanian's discussion on research and knowledge development pertaining to homeless services and social work practice. Please join us again at [inSocialWork](#).

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