

Episode 72 - Dr. Jan Ivery and Dr. M. Lori Thomas: Aging in Place on the Streets: Homelessness Among Older Adults

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF. A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Oduor Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 130000 downloads to date. Thanks to all of you we'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcasts in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Hi from Buffalo where the sailboats are back in the Outer Harbor and our downtown marina is open for business. I'm Peter Sobota. We would all like to age gracefully in a place preferably that we've come to love. But we know that doesn't always work out for even the most privileged among us. But what does it mean to age in place. If you've never had a place that's only one of the questions asked by our guests in this episode Dr. Lori Thomas and Dr. Jan Ivery discuss their work teasing out and identifying the contradictions in service delivery systems and the developing knowledge of older adult homelessness.

[00:02:02] Our guests describe the unique markers for research in this area and the scope and nature of a population. Doctors Thomas and Ivery conclude by identifying the gaps present in service delivery systems and their suggestions for improving both the sensitivity and the societal response to this growing population. Dr. Jan Ivery is associate professor at Georgia State University's School of Social Work. Where interests include collaborative partnerships Capacity Building Community Organization and development and gerontology Dr. Lori Thomas is assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Department of Social Work. We'd like to congratulate Dr. Thomas who has recently been named as a 2011 Hartford faculty scholar to cultivate her research doctors Ivery and Thomas were interviewed by telephone for this podcast by Nancy Kusmaul a doctoral student here at the UB School of Social Work. I'm Nancy Kusmaul a doctoral student at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Here with me to talk about homelessness and older adults are Dr. Lori Thomas Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. And Dr. Jan Ivery associate professor at Georgia State University School of Social Work. Welcome to you both. Thank you. Thank you. Why don't we start with each of you telling us about what brought you to the topic of older adult homelessness. Sure well this is Lori and I came to this topic because of my practice experience.

[00:03:37] I began a program in the Greater Richmond Virginia area while I was in graduate school that served individuals with serious mental illness and current substance abuse disorders who were also chronically homeless and through that experience I recognized that we had spent a lot of time making sure that we were creating a program that followed some pretty strict guidelines who are implementing an evidence based program. But in doing so and in close and careful attention to what we were doing program implementation we also recognize we weren't really paying attention to at least the specific needs of about a third of our program participants and those of the folks who were 50 and over. It wasn't until I left and started a faculty position that I realized wow we had this significant group of folks that we hadn't paid attention to some of their special needs because of their aging needs. And I became really interested in older adult homelessness through that path. Hi this is Jan and I actually came to the issue related to homelessness among older adults kind of through deparate days of research my dissertation research focused on organizational partnership among individuals who provide services to homeless individuals. And a lot of my early work was

focused on the organizational capacity the duty to partner together and to develop applications for would continue with care funding. Well kind of fast forward three or four years. And I was drawn to exploring issues ways to commuting organization capacity as it related to service delivery for older adults within the metropolitan Atlanta area.

[00:05:22] And from my prior relationship with Lori because we were both doctoral students in the same program we would have numerous conversations over the years and talk about the work that we were presenting and we kind of had an aha moment where we figured that it made sense for us to start to look at the concepts related to aging in place as it relates to a population who may not have had stable housing over the course of their lifetime. Now Lori you mentioned adults 50 and older. How are you defining older adults in the context of homelessness. Yeah that's a great question because we often start our discussion of older adulthood at 62 or 65 and what we know about older adults on the street are folks who've experienced homelessness. Are there some markers both biological and mental health markers of aging actually began much sooner. And we have studies that range from beginning discussing older adulthood and homelessness beginning as 50 or as early as 45. And so generally when we're discussing older homeless adults we're talking about adults 50 and over although again in the literature there's some variation there was 45 50 55 being the age at which we are talking about older homeless adults. Can you describe the scope and the nature of older adult homelessness. This is Lori. Sure I can go ahead and do that. We know that there are about one point sixty three point five million people homeless annually. And that is that's quite a range of US based on different methods. Counting our homeless population. We know that that percentage is about two to eight percent of the homeless population is 65 and older and that's generally where we're counting older adults homelessness in those more official counts when we start to talk about older homeless adulthood starting at age 50. We see that about 25 a quarter roughly a quarter to a third of the homeless population are actually 50 and over. Pretty significant portion of the homeless population that doesn't get very much attention in the literature.

[00:07:32] This is work that you guys have presented and accounts from Social Work Education last fall. And in that presentation you discussed the concept of aging in place. Can you tell us more about that and how it relates to this homeless group. Sure. This is Jan, a place is a broad term that's used to describe older adults living in their own residencies and communities as long as possible without moving to a more restrictive environment such as a nursing home or assisted living facility and whatever I think about the term or discuss the time it's become somewhat of a no brainer that people want to remain in the places that they identify as home as long as possible. So when we began to think about this concept of aging in place we need to consider the fit of older adults within their residential settings as they age and it becomes essential because there isn't always a goodness of fit between the older adults as they age and their existing community. And when we begin to think about this concept as it relates to older adults who may be homeless what does it mean age in place. If you've never had a place for a long period of time what does that mean. We start to look at how we can keep older adults socially integrated into their communities. If a person has been living on the streets for a significant period of time it may not have had that opportunity to develop those social bonds and connections that helped to facilitate aging in place and even going a little bit further. The successful agent paradigm in which individuals remain active throughout the course of their lives.

[00:09:04] So what theoretical frameworks have you use to inform your understanding of aging in place. Is it different then would you say generally aging in place. This is Jan. That's a good question and a lot of this is drawn from ecological theories that emphasize the person environment perspective and specifically Lawton's press competence model has been one framework that we have used to guide our work. And basically this model was one of the first to examine the relationship between what's considered the person's competencies which is a biological health since we're motor functioning cognition in their environment. And this model postulated that it's a

combination of individual competencies as well as individual pressures or demands that can affect adaptive behavior of how people actually age. So in other words the health and well-being of older adults with lower levels of competence i.e. physical mental social health will be the ones most negatively affected by environmental demands such as poor transportation high crime insufficient services or that relate specifically to our work unstable housing or nonexistent housing environments. So what are some critical perspectives of the aging in place model for the homeless population. This is Lori and one of the things that Jan and I both discussed this kind of how paying attention to older homeless adults helps us also look at kind of the standard aging in place discussion through a critical lens and particularly critical perspectives actually call our attention to several things that are happening in aging in place discussion and that are really appropriate to consider for particularly this population.

[00:10:52] But for a lot of vulnerable populations who are aging in place and one is the restructuring of the life course and even before that let me say one of the main things that critical perspectives do they caution us about kind of the risk of using adaptation or assuming adaptation as a central concept and those critical perspective ask us to consider what are we having folks adapt to. So for instance are we asking folks to adapt to this chaotic life of streets and shelter. And what are the implications of that for aging health and wellbeing. But beyond that critical perspectives ask us or suggest that we pay attention to how the dominant discourse about aging in place has kind of restructured the life course of aging. So we have these expectations of bountiful youth. There's also a restructuring of Social space and what one scholar has called the redevelopment of landscapes of later life Blaikie telling us to go to change our perspective from an old folks home to more of the aging recreationally and as an escape and a haven and that restructuring is suggesting that older adulthood is healthy and carefree and problem free. And so sometimes are aging in place. Conversation is focused more on these restructured ideas of youth and restructured ideas of social space and really present us with a pretty privileged view of aging and critical perspective particularly with this population. Call us to that privilege view of aging and that not all and many of our most vulnerable are not aging in such a way. You're suggesting contradictions and in some of the work you presented you suggested that there are contradictions within and between the personal the service and the environmental processes needed for older adults who are homeless to find an environmental fit. Could you talk more about those contradictions.

[00:13:10] This is Jan and building upon what Lori talked about with a critical perspective. One of the critiques are as we begin to look at the successful aging paradigm using the critical perspective lens it is making some underlying assumptions that people have reached a point in their lives in a life coach perspective. They've gone through significant transitions within trajectories that brought them to this place. So now the expectation is that they engage in ABC type behaviors. They should be able to live a long freeful life with things that's missing from that discussion as well what about those who may not have been privileged throughout their life. Because when you think about aging it's actually a combination of your life experiences up to that point. So what happens when you have a vulnerable population who has been living on the street and has had aspects of their health their wellbeing compromised. Given the demands that arise from living on the street that's one perspective. Another perspective is what happens when we look at our service delivery models. Renewed and increasing attention to individuals who are getting older due to the shift in our demographics. However again their content isn't always attention made to what are the services for those who are the most vulnerable. It may need maybe a more intense this type of services at this particular stage of their life course compared to others. So are you suggesting that maybe the homeless services are not addressing the older adults but the older adult services aren't addressing homelessness. This is Jan. Exactly.

[00:14:48] And it seems that there's a gap somewhere in that the service delivery systems kind of aren't communicating with each other and that's one of the things that Lori and I and I have started

pose through our work is how can we look to see what the connection between these two populations and how do we need to restructure environments so that we can keep that fit for individuals going through these transitions. Do you have particular suggestions or implications for improving the service delivery to homeless older adults. Nancy if I could possibly go back just a second and talk a little bit more about some of those internal contradictions or those contradictions that Jan and I have been noticing. One of the things that we talk about for healthy aging in general is just retaining a sense of control. As one ages the importance of building choices to these aging in place environments so people really really are even if they are moving from that primary sense of control which is where they feel like they can control external changes that are happening to them to this more secondary sense of control where they can control what's happening how they respond to these external circumstances. Jan and I have discussed that often that the terror environment that older homeless adults experience have removed all sense of control. There is not only does a person not have control over where they're staying and they don't have a place to choose to go to. Once once they check into the homeless services system or enter into the homeless services system some way there aren't many mechanisms of control that are built into that care environment. So so we actually see some really explicit contradictions of what we know we need for healthy aging happening as people are.

[00:16:36] There's very little control that people are able to exercise within the homeless services system. So what are some suggestions or implications for improving services to homeless older adults recognizing that there is this subpopulation that gets so little treatment or so little consideration in both research and practice. There are I can tell you probably two places across the country so Boston has a really strong emphasis on aging homeless adults as does L.A. and both of those places certainly don't reflect the norm across the country and most of our service homeless service sectors are not responding specifically to the problem of older adult homelessness even though we know that that group will be growing in the next 50 years and we've seen a couple of cohort studies that suggest to us that the overall aging of the homeless population specifically addressing this specific subpopulations is one important suggestion. I think another one would be there's some promise in a recent innovation called Housing First. I think for older homeless adults which really focuses on securing housing as an initial step in service delivery and kind of providing that well you know we frequently teach your students about Minnesota's hierarchy of needs really kind of securing that base level of housing beyond on shelter and letting no progress go on and services from there. That has been very useful model with other populations particularly the chronic homeless population. And I think provides some helpful or some promise for working with older homeless adults.

[00:18:24] It builds upon lawyers to this point that we need to take a contextual approach to aging when working with this particular population and making sure that researchers not only research but also practitioners are aware that maybe some of the traditional ways of providing services may not work. They need to be altered and I think that's one of the main take home that Lori and I hope to come out of this research that we need to replace aging services within the context of an individual who has been experiencing homelessness and moving away from kind of the one size fits all approach that ends the kind of questions I had prepared for this. Are there any areas of this topic that we haven't covered that you feel are important to share with our audience. Well one of the things I realized on this tour were talking about the patterns of what we know while we older homeless adult hood has not really been explored in the literature. We do have some initial themes based on a few studies that have been done and those might be important to share. One would be that the racial disproportionality that exists in every home subcategory but also persists into older adulthood and homelessness. We see African-Americans are overrepresented in every homeless category including older adults. We also see some potential gender differences and aging that would be important to explore and future research. One study has suggested that men tend to age into older adulthood on the streets while women tend to have some later life events that play or they lose their

housing. And that's usually some sort of family disruption death of a caregiver death of a spouse. So those things we do see across the board an increase in new homelessness among older adults regardless of gender. In addition Mutchler like all categories of homelessness there are multiple risk factors that lead to homelessness on both individual and structural levels.

[00:20:28] But it's widely considered that the ultimate determinant of homelessness among older adults are lack of affordable housing lack of income support or declining income support lack of outreach programs specifically for older homeless adults and those sorts of things. So what do you see as the future of this area being both in terms of research and in terms of service delivery. Do you have any hopes for the future in this area. Well you know when we presented at CSWE there were a couple of folks in the audience who showed interest and were actually doing some initial research in this area. And so that's hopeful we hope to continue our research in this area. Certainly you know we need all hands on deck. I think there was a recent report by the nationalized and homelessness expects that older adult homelessness and they were defining I think by age 62 and over not even by age 50 and over but older adult homelessness is expected to increase 33 percent by 2020 and increase by 50 percent by 2050 with the aging baby boomers. You know we we really have a problem on our hand that is not sufficiently addressed in our research nor in our development of service alternatives. So I think it's an all hands on deck need. And I guess my hope is in additional hands on that just to bring renewed attention to this particular issue could be coming from a social justice perspective that we do have this segment of the population that currently does not have a voice. And my hope is that their boys and their experiences become incorporated into our models of service delivery or working with older adult populations.

[00:22:10] On that note I want to thank you both for joining us for the University of Buffalo School Social Work podcast series. Again we have Dr. Lori Thomas from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Dr. Jan Ivery from Georgia State University. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You've been listening to Dr. Jan Ivery and Dr. Lori Thomas discuss older adult homelessness on a living proof. Hi I'm Nancy Smith Professor and Dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Here at UB, we are living through that makes a difference in people's lives.