

Interview with Susie Sinclair-Smith, MCCH's Executive Director

We sat down with the newly appointed executive director of the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH), Susie Sinclair-Smith, to talk about what brought her to MCCH and to learn more about her career working on behalf of those experiencing homelessness.

1) What attracted you to join the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless?

My first introduction to MCCH was when I stepped inside Seneca Heights Apartments as a participant on a tour for the William S. Abell Foundation (WSAF). I was managing WSAF's \$8.5 M strategic initiative to end homelessness in the District of Columbia through spurring the creation of permanent supportive housing using Housing First.

I would never have known that Seneca Heights was a former uninhabitable, run-down motel when I walked into a warm, inviting apartment complex. As we toured the facility, I noticed that the offices for case managers and on-site services were strategically located to be immediately accessible but in a place that provided privacy for residents to access supportive services. The fact that 40 chronically homeless single adults and 17 families were thriving together in their new home meant that it became a dream model in our strategic initiative to end homelessness.

I next attended a meeting at MCCH with County agencies to develop strategies to "close the front door" to becoming homeless for populations who were entering shelters because they had no home after they were discharged from such programs as jail, hospitals, and in-patient psychiatric care. The room was abuzz with cross-sector small group discussions identifying services and housing gaps upon returning to the community and opportunities to engage individuals who could potentially fall into homelessness with discharge planning services prior to release. I knew then that MCCH was a unique and special organization committed to ending homelessness through dignified and state-of-the-art approaches.

The fact that MCCH had established Coalition Homes, Inc. as a subsidiary operation to increase the supply of affordable housing for individuals and families who had experienced homelessness was also a huge draw for me. I have spent many years advancing policies and creating resources to create a supply of permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless populations. So I've seen that the organizations that are most successful in this field have the combined capacity to develop and manage housing, and design and offer supportive services that meet the individual needs of tenants. Also, being able to offer a choice of housing options - either in a scattered-site apartment with connections to support in the community or a building complex with on-site services - to individuals and families as they move out of homelessness is key to ensuring their future housing stability. MCCH has this vision and has secured a significant and varied housing stock - I am very excited about building upon this success.

Also impressive to me was the inspirational engagement to date of the Montgomery County Government that has adopted the Housing First approach to ending homelessness, and dedicated significant County funding for critical and innovative service and housing programs.

With the commitment of the County government and the community capacity and support that exists here, I truly believe that if any place can end homelessness in partnership with the federal government - it is Montgomery County.

I am looking forward to building upon MCCH's successes as we implement our mission of solving housing crises and ending homelessness...I've seen firsthand the adverse effects of homelessness and the importance of advancing policies and generating resources to create a

supply of permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless populations. Ensuring everyone has dignified housing is key. There was no question that MCCH shared this same belief and it is why I was drawn here.

2) What led you to found the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless? How did your experience there shape your career in finding solutions to homelessness?

I chose to attend Antioch Law School in D.C. because it had a unique concentration and clinical programs addressing poverty issues. While studying for the bar upon graduation in 1985, I helped represent people who had been involuntarily committed to St Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital as being a danger to themselves or others. At that time, the phenomenon of individuals living on the streets in DC began to blossom - a great majority suffered from psychiatric illness and many were Vietnam-era veterans who had few supports upon their return home from the war. D.C. attorneys and law students began volunteering their time in shelters to help in any way possible this newly emerging "homeless" population - who lived outside their workplace - and appealed to the District of Columbia Bar to hire a part-time coordinator to facilitate their efforts.

I eagerly accepted the coordinator position believing that no person should live on the streets, especially those who are frail and not able to care for themselves; and that the resources of an attorney could go a long way in helping people experiencing homelessness to gain access to entitled benefits, fight housing evictions, and address issues of discrimination. Six years later, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless had spun-off as a six-person nonprofit "pro bono" legal clinic supporting the activities of 200 volunteer attorneys providing weekly assistance to homeless individuals and families in 11 DC shelters. We were awarded the American Bar Association's prestigious Harrison Tweed Award for the outstanding "pro bono" clinic in the nation for reaching clients most in-need.

In hindsight, the Legal Clinic's growth was similar to spontaneous combustion. As homelessness became more prevalent on DC's streets, including the faces of parents with children in the late eighties, the numbers of volunteers from law firms and schools and government agencies escalated. Through providing critical one-on-one assistance to their clients (most frequently helping to navigate bureaucracies and providing ongoing guidance and support), the Clinic's staff and volunteers began to identify systemic issues that were causing people to become homeless and were keeping them trapped in the emergency shelter "system of care."

Major law firms came forward offering to address these more system-wide issues. A glaring one was that the DC Housing Authority owned hundreds of boarded-up, uninhabitable units of public housing that should have been available to our homeless clients but the agency was not capable of maintaining and managing their housing stock. The Clinic partnered with firms on a number of class-action lawsuits resulting in the placement of the DC Housing Authority into receivership, the provision of apartment-style dwellings and comprehensive services for homeless families, and expedited processing of food stamps for clients. The DC Housing Authority receivership case clearly presented to me the critical link between the lack of affordable housing and the incidence of homelessness amongst families and individuals.

On a personal level, I was buoyed by the public's will and passion to help people experiencing homelessness. At the same time, I realized that my personal and professional life had not boundaries and was immensely saddened when Mitch Snyder, the renowned homeless advocate and close ally of the Legal Clinic, committed suicide. His death helped me realize the importance of self-care when serving people in such great need, and my interest in learning

more about the public housing and service systems that would create a solution to homelessness.

Why do you believe this field is your calling? Do you have a personal story?

I have many friends and close colleagues who have devoted their careers to solving homelessness. I am thrilled and very fortunate that the MCCH staff are now included in this circle. Once someone is touched by the issue of homelessness or connects personally with someone who is homeless, a sense of humility and compassion kicks in. I'm sure many people felt as I did that "that could be me, or my brother or my mother. I am so fortunate to have a roof over my head, to feel safe, not to be hungry, and not to have to experience the nightmare of cycling through different systems for help to meet my basic needs!" Taking that first step and overcoming the initial interpersonal awkwardness to engage with someone who is experiencing homelessness, that's when humanity sets in and a realization that having a conversation can bring to the person a sense of dignity and humanity. The more you engage with people experiencing homelessness and hear about their journeys, you realize that a little help can go a long way; and that homelessness is not caused by the individual but by ineffective systems and a lack of an adequate safety net to help people who experience crises.

The first Legal Clinic client I spoke to was a Vietnam Era veteran. Post-traumatic stress had not been identified as a post-war condition at that time, and accessing veterans' benefits was a challenge especially for those experiencing mental illness. He believed that the FBI was monitoring him through a tooth implant. He had come to the nation's capital to resolve the issue and was living on the street. The face of family homelessness became evident when the Pitts Motor Inn, a once historic DC meeting place during the Civil Rights Era, was filled to the brim with parents and children who had to leave the motel each morning, walk down to the bottom of the hill, and wait for a bus to take them to a day program only to return to the motel by bus late the same evening.

That was the mid-1980s and so much has changed. The Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Affairs now offer HUD-VASH, a supportive housing program that links housing vouchers with case management and clinical services for homeless veterans who would not be able to live independently without the support of case management and services. Counties and cities nationwide are reducing the length of stay families spend in transitional housing and increasing the number families that rapidly move into permanent housing as a central strategy to end family homelessness. I am proud of my contributions to these changes and will always remember how far we've come.

What prompted you to return to a community-based organization after years of working at the regional/national level?

It's an exciting time to be implementing programs when so much is known about the different causes of homelessness, successful interventions for different groups, and opportunities to prevent people from becoming homeless.

Also, it is a time when the federal government is fully engaged and committed to ending homelessness by ensuring that the population has access to mainstream government programs as outlined in the recently published federal strategic plan, *Opening Doors*, on which I served as an expert consultant.

Leading organizations such as MCCH make the major contributions to this pool of knowledge and best-practices by implementing innovations on a local level which are then, when proven successful, incorporated into federal policy.