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The Structural Causes of Homelessness in Baltimore: An Interview with Jeff Singer

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Jeff Singer is President and CEO of Health Care of the Homeless. This interview was recorded in his office in January 2008. There is a common assumption in our society that homelessness is caused by personal irresponsibility, often attributed to mental illness or substance abuse. Do you agree with this view, or is homelessness produced by deeper structural and economic conditions? Well first, it's curious to think that mental illness or substance abuse have anything to do with personal responsibility. We believe that homelessness is fundamentally caused by a political and economic system. By structures that maintain poverty, that maintain an inadequate supply of affordable housing, and that prevent people from getting access to services they need, especially healthcare. There are 47 million Americans that don't have health insurance. There are more than 100,000 people in Baltimore City who don't have health insurance. So these are the fundamental problems that we need to address. Yes, of course, there is a personal aspect to homelessness, but I don't believe it's personal irresponsibility that causes it. **The local media regularly cite a statistic that says there are 3,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in Baltimore City. Where does this number come from and do you believe it provides an accurate assessment of the problem?** The number derives from a census that the City conducts once every two years. In 2007, volunteers went into the streets and found 3,002 people who were either in shelters or living on the streets. Of course, it's an undercount. There are 42,000 vacant houses in Baltimore and the volunteers didn't go into all of them. In fact, they went into almost none of them. There are hidden places in parks and under bridges. Over the course of the year, you would have to multiply that number by 8 to 10, so there may be 30,000 people who experience homelessness. **Joan Jacobson's recent report, "The Dismantling of Baltimore's Public Housing," published by the Abell Foundation, shows that there has been a 42% decline in the number of occupied public housing units in the city over the last 15 years. Is this due to a failure of leadership at the Housing Authority of Baltimore City, or does it reflect a larger trend in US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policy?** Well, it probably reflects both. On the federal level, there has been an enormous decline in support for affordable housing. In 1980, the federal budget for affordable housing in 2007 dollars (adjusted for inflation) was about \$76 billion. Today it's \$32 billion. So it's much less than half. The city of Baltimore, and every other city, doesn't receive the kind of federal support they need to maintain their public housing, or certainly to add any. There hasn't been any new public housing built in decades. There haven't been any new Section 8 certificates issued in a decade. Bill Clinton slashed federal support for affordable housing, and George Bush has only maintained that

negative policy. **What happens when the responsibility of housing the poor is shifted from government to the private sector? Is there any incentive for private developers to build affordable housing?** Not much. Recently the City Council has wrestled with the concept of inclusionary zoning and the housing trust fund. The housing trust fund is very small and most of the money in it has been used to tear down housing. Inclusionary zoning legislation did pass the Council, but it doesn't target people who are very, very poor, and that's what we need to do.

How hard is it for a person working a full-time minimum-wage job in Baltimore City to afford a place to live? Well, it's pretty much impossible. The fair market rent in Baltimore City is about \$750 a month for a single-bedroom apartment, and if you multiply that by three, you get the amount of income someone needs to afford it. In fact, you would have to work two full-time minimum-wage jobs to afford it. **We have recently seen several of the city's homeless shelters close their doors, including the Oasis Center downtown, Brown's Community Outreach, Inc., in Pimlico, the YWCA on West Franklin Street, and I Can, Inc., on Greenmount Avenue.**

What impact has this had, and why are shelters closing when homelessness appears to be on the rise? Fortunately, the City opened a large shelter for the winter on the 1600 block of Guilford Avenue. (It will close on March 31.) Three hundred to three hundred and fifty people are staying there every night. To some extent, it makes up for the recent closures, but remember that all of these shelters were open last year, and the City was still sheltering 300 to 350 people a night. So there is a deficit in shelter beds. We say that shelter is not the solution to homelessness: housing is the solution to homelessness, as well as adequate incomes and access to health services. However, on any given night, people could freeze to death if they don't have a place to go. So we believe that in the short run we need emergency shelter, but in the long run we need national public policies. **In general, what are some of the health problems that homeless people face?**

Homelessness itself causes some health problems: hypothermia, for example, in the winter, or dehydration in the summer. It also exacerbates any existing health problems that people may have. For example, if you have a cut and you're sleeping on the street, it's going to become an infection. If you have a cold and you're sleeping on the street, it's going to become pneumonia. Homelessness also complicates the treatment of any problems. If you have diabetes, where in the world do you keep your insulin and syringes, and how do you keep a low-carbohydrate diet, when the soup kitchens are serving macaroni and cheese? So at Health Care for the Homeless one of our missions is to learn and practice treatment that is culturally and geographically and physically appropriate for people on the streets. We have done this for 22 years now. So we kind of know how to do it. But last year we only saw 6,000 people in the city, and there may have been 30,000 people who needed our services. Across the state, we saw 11,000 different people. There were probably 50,000 people who needed our services.

In August, The Downtown Partnership made headlines when its workers conducted a sweep of the encampment located on Guilford Avenue under the Jones Falls Expressway, effectively evicting the people who were living there, and reportedly confiscating some of their possessions. (The Downtown Partnership later disputed the article in The Sun that reported the incident, claiming that their actions had been misrepresented and their workers were merely "cleaning" the area.) What was your response to this event, and is it part of a larger pattern of anti-homeless discrimination in downtown Baltimore? Our immediate response to the event was to organize a meeting with the Downtown Partnership, the City, homeless folks who were living there and advocates, and the Downtown Partnership assured us that it was not their policy to "sweep" the streets, but in practice, we believe this did happen. They announced a policy and even changed some of their practices at the encampment. They began to ask people to put out their trash, so they could clean up the trash, but not take people's

belongings, which is a good development. Are there anti-homeless policies in the city though? Well, it's a complicated question. There have been for years: people who are homeless have been harassed, they've been "moved along," they've been arrested. There was a lawsuit against the City that was settled about ten or twelve years ago. The City Police now have a settlement with the ACLU, in which they are forbidden from moving people along. But does it happen? Sure. People get arrested for public intoxication, for open containers, for urinating in public, for the kinds of crimes you wouldn't get arrested for if you had a place to live. So that's a really substantial problem. **What were the politics surrounding the recent relocation of the city's largest soup kitchen, Our Daily Bread, from Cathedral Street across from the Enoch Pratt Free Library to the east side of the Jones Falls Expressway, right across from Central Booking?** I think clearly the politics of it were that downtown business interests were eager not to have lines of homeless folks in highly visible locations. Associated Catholic Charities worked hard to raise the money to build a new place. What's curious and interesting, though, is that the place they built is right across from Central Booking. From some advocates' perspective, that's a terrible thing to do. The Catholic Workers, Viva House—people that I greatly respect—are outraged by it. We, on the other hand, have a different perspective: our clients are in Central Booking, and we want to be there to help them when they get released at 3 a.m. and ought to have a place to go. That place to go isn't currently Our Daily Bread, but everyone in the jail is someone that we want to work with. So we're in fact building a new clinic, and it will be on the Fallsway, four blocks south of Central Booking, and I think it's a great location, because we want to be accessible to people.

President Bush is constantly reminding Americans to "support our troops," yet veterans make up 26% of the estimated 3 million homeless people in the US. How can we account for this contradiction? How can we account for contradictions with President Bush? Where does one start? There's a long history of lack of support for homeless veterans, and it didn't start with Bush. There is an interesting history of homelessness that related to World War II and its aftermath, World War I and its aftermath, and even the Civil War and its aftermath. There were waves of homelessness after all of those wars. After the Civil War there were significant numbers of homeless veterans, and during the late 19th century there were homeless encampments throughout the nation. During the Depression, of course, there was significant organizing around homelessness and some of it involved veterans. And some of that happened right here in Baltimore. In the 1930s, thousands of people gathered in front of City Hall because they were hungry and had no place to live, and they demanded help and eventually the City created a very large encampment south of the city. Homeless folks took over some private residences, famously in Fell's Point. Where there is now the Admiral Fell Inn at one time there was a place where merchant seaman lived. They lost their jobs and took over the building and created a commune there in the 1930s. So there has been a really interesting history of organizing that's hidden.

In its 2007 survey of 23 American cities, the US Conference of Mayors found that families with children comprised 23% of the homeless population, a definite increase from previous years. In your experience, has this been the case in Baltimore? I don't know if there is really good data on an increase in homeless families in Baltimore. There are many families who are homeless. The Department of Social Services testified at a City Council hearing on the eve of Thanksgiving about the increase in homeless families they are seeing and the lack of resources to address it. There are homeless families staying up at the winter shelter. The YWCA shelter closed, the Salvation Army shelter is open but full, and there aren't too many shelters for families. So it's a big problem, but I don't know if it's a bigger problem than it was ten years ago. One of the really important factors that relates to it is what's happened with public housing. Joan Jacobson is absolutely right, there are 42% fewer public housing units, and she believes there is a

disproportionate impact on the family units. We know people who lived in units that were torn down through the Hope VI program, when the high-rises were imploded. We know people who had nowhere to go and ended up in our waiting room. **Do you foresee the current sub-prime mortgage crisis, which some economists predict will result in 2 to 3 million people losing their homes to foreclosures nationwide, forcing more families onto the streets in 2008?** Unfortunately, yes. And there has been little action on the federal level to do anything about it (there's been a small intervention on the state level). As long as the supply of affordable housing continues to decline—which it is everywhere—and so long as HUD's budget is so woefully inadequate, yes, any factors that impact people's access to housing are going to produce homelessness, and the federal response to the problem has been pitifully small. They spend more money in a week in Iraq than they do in year on homelessness. **Mayor Dixon is expected to announce a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Baltimore, which includes a proposal to build 1,800 new units of affordable housing (500 Housing First units plus 1,300 units for people with disabilities including homeless people, plus twenty five projects with an unspecified number of units). Do you think this is an adequate response to the problem?** It's a helpful response, but of course it's not an adequate response. There are 40,000 households in Baltimore that are at risk of homelessness because they can't afford the housing that they're living in. So 1,800 housing units doesn't meet the need of 40,000 people. There are 160,000 evictions filed in Baltimore every year. Now not all of these result in an actual eviction but the number of evictions filed is an indication of the desperate need for affordable housing, and Baltimore City has no plan, to our knowledge, to find sufficient resources to deal with the problem. Now, is it all the City's fault? Of course not. We talked about HUD, and that's the center of the problem. But there have been several billion dollars' worth of development around the Inner Harbor, and none of it has been affordable housing. There are very few incentives to build affordable housing. So we have an enormous amount of work to do to change this. **If you had to come up with a 10-year plan to end homelessness in the city, what would be some of the first things on your agenda?** First would be to focus on the federal policy issues, because they're the ones that drive homelessness, not the local policy issues. As I said, there are 47 million people in this country without healthcare. This is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't guarantee healthcare as a right of birth. That's easy to change conceptually. Everyone knows what a good health insurance plan would look like: it would be a single-payer plan, and it would be financed like Medicare, except it would be open to everyone, and not just people over the age of 65. A single-payer plan reduces the administrative costs of healthcare from the current 25% to 4%, and therefore you can provide healthcare to everyone without it costing any more money. It's not that we need more money for healthcare, it's that we need more healthcare for the money we spend. So that would be number one, and then number two would be to do something about housing. The housing situation is desperate and dire. We talked about the HUD budget already. It currently, for example, funds about 80% of the cost of public housing in any jurisdiction including Baltimore. And the City doesn't have the money to make up the other 20%, so it tears down housing units, or it allows them to become vacant. It's not necessarily the City's fault. We need a national affordable housing trust fund, there is currently legislation in Congress about this, and we'd like to see the City put resources into advocating for it. Then there is the incomes issue, and poverty. 23.5 % of the citizens in Baltimore are poor, 32% of all the children live in poverty, and this is shameful. Incomes for people who are employed are too low. The minimum wage—even the new minimum wage—is not enough. Healthcare for the Homeless has a minimum wage of \$13.35 an hour. We don't pay people who work here less than that, and we make sure that everybody has health insurance. We also promote this among other non-profits. So that would

be part of our 10-year plan, to ensure that when people are employed they have enough to afford housing. When people are unemployed or on disability assistance in this City, in this State, in this nation, it is tragic. A person who is completely and totally disabled earns about \$630 per month, and the fair market rate for a single apartment is \$750. So if you're in that situation, you're going to be homeless. State disability assistance is far worse: it's \$185 per month. So among the features of our 10-year plan to end homelessness would be to assure that wages are adequate and that disability assistance is also adequate, to assure that there is a sufficient supply of affordable housing, and to assure that people have access to comprehensive health services. That would be a start. **To conclude, is there anything else you would like our readers to know?** Absolutely! That they need to be active! Because all of this can change, and it's up to us to change it. There is a city-wide organization called SHARP (Stopping Homelessness and Reducing Poverty), and we'd encourage people to become active in SHARP. It meets monthly and information is available from Healthcare for the Homeless, from our Community Relations Associate Adam Schneider, whose telephone number is (410) 837-5533. On the state level, there's no one good organization to join, but people need to be aware of what's happening. The Sun is a fairly good way to keep track of that. MANO and their Budget and Tax Policy Institute is also a good place to find out about what's happening. People need to know who their State legislators are, and we have a day in Annapolis on February 28, and we would encourage people to come and join us. We rent buses and take all of our clients and all of our staff down, and we usually have 500 to 700 people there advocating for progressive public policy. For more information about Health Care for the Homeless, visit <http://www.hchmd.org> [3] on the Web.

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