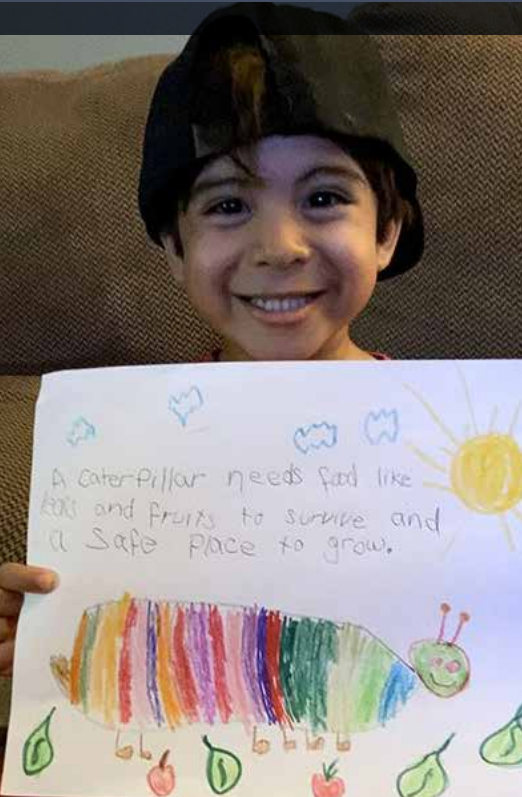




GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

A project of National Catholic Reporter



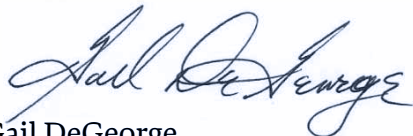
STORIES OF INSPIRATION

A Place to Call Home: Stories of Inspiration Amid a Pandemic

We're pleased to present Global Sisters Report readers with a special e-book showcasing some of the stories and sister-written columns from our A Place to Call Home series published in 2020. The series, which focused on Catholic sisters who minister to those who are homeless or lack adequate shelter, received an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press, and also won recognition from the Religion Communicators Council.

We began planning the coverage almost a year before launching this ambitious project. Our international correspondent, Chris Herlinger, had been talking with sisters at the United Nations about their advocacy on the issue. As a New York City resident, he was also aware of the toll homelessness takes on so many. He and managing editor Pam Hackenmiller worked with staff and freelancers to determine stories to illustrate particular themes. Ursuline Sr. Michele Morek identified columns by sisters who reflected on their experiences and ministries. We launched the series in February 2020 to coincide with first-ever meetings at the United Nations addressing homelessness and affordable housing.

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, we decided to continue the project despite the challenges posed by reporting during a global health crisis and our need to also cover the widespread effects of the coronavirus on congregations and sisters. As many governments around the world forced people to shelter in place in the initial response to the pandemic, the dire need to address the issue became clear. The numbers are staggering: More than 1.6 billion people worldwide live in substandard housing, and of those, at least 150 million have no home at all. Catholic sisters worldwide are providing solutions and inspiration to many and working to effect change.



Gail DeGeorge

EDITOR



In 2020, Global Sisters Report published its A Place to Call Home series, which focused on women religious helping people who are homeless or lack adequate shelter. The series included 14 stories, six Q&As and five columns from eight countries, plus an interactive map made from almost 100 entries from a Google Form.

The full series can be found here: [↗ globalsistersreport.org/gsr-series/a-place-to-call-home/stories](https://globalsistersreport.org/gsr-series/a-place-to-call-home/stories).

The interactive map can be found here: [↗ google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1w4y-afLlQe0ptEwhhM-WQ_vom8ogevYY&ll=-3.81666561775622e-14%2C-56.155287149999999&z=1](https://google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1w4y-afLlQe0ptEwhhM-WQ_vom8ogevYY&ll=-3.81666561775622e-14%2C-56.155287149999999&z=1).



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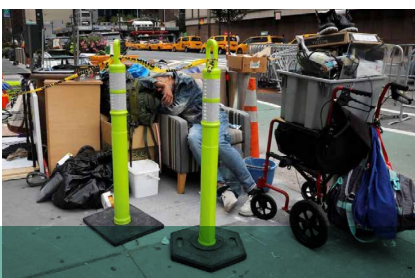
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Sr. Margaret Farrell, a member of the Religious Sisters of Charity, is spiritual ministry coordinator at Covenant House California in Los Angeles and a frequent visitor to the streets of Skid Row in the city's downtown area. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Sisters address inadequate housing worldwide

Feb 10, 2020

by **Chris Herlinger**

*Editor's note: More than 1.6 billion people worldwide live in substandard housing. Of those, at least 150 million have no home at all. In this special series, *A Place to Call Home*, *Global Sisters Report* is focusing on women religious helping people who are homeless or lack adequate shelter. Over the next several months, we will examine how homelessness and a lack of affordable housing affect teens and young adults, families, migrants, the elderly and those displaced by natural disasters and climate change in stories from Kenya, India, Vietnam, Ireland, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, the United States and elsewhere.*

LOS ANGELES — Thirty-seven-year-old Tommy Dunphy, a native of California's San Gabriel Valley, is no stranger to the streets of

Los Angeles' Skid Row. He has known both homelessness and the perils of jail, having spent time in and out of prison for two decades for drug-related charges.

But Dunphy has been doing his best to live a "clean" life, keeping various addiction and mental health challenges at bay and managing his HIV. Taking care of Arianna, his beloved dog of two and a half years, is a cornerstone in his life. So is his low-rent, government-subsidized apartment in the Gateway apartment complex on Skid Row.

Another godsend is his longstanding friendship with Sr. Margaret Farrell, a member of the Religious Sisters of Charity, spiritual ministry coordinator at Covenant House California in Los Angeles and frequent visitor to Skid Row.

As many as 60,000 people may be living on the streets at night in Los Angeles. In what is perhaps the most potent and visible symbol of



Tommy Dunphy, 37, used to live on Los Angeles' Skid Row but now rents a low-rent, government-subsidized apartment in the Gateway apartment complex in Skid Row, where he lives with his dog, Arianna. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

homelessness in the nation's second-largest city, hundreds of people live in tents on Skid Row — a risky and often dangerous life, exposing them to crime, drugs and prostitution.

The linked problems of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing are drawing urgent attention at the moment, though it is nothing new to Catholic sisters like Farrell who have championed the cause of shelter and housing in their ministries. Hundreds, if not thousands, of sisters are working in such ministries globally. And at the core of that ministry is a moral imperative grounded in the Gospel and the belief that having a home affords human dignity.

“No one should be living in the street, or in a car, or bouncing around from one relative's couch to another,” said Mercy Sr. Helen Amos, a longtime housing and homelessness activist in Baltimore, Maryland.

Dunphy says the ability to live in a safe, quiet

apartment is the key to his success in the last three years.

No more prison, he said. “I'm done doing time.”

Dunphy's story is a tale of quiet success. But sisters and others who minister to those experiencing homelessness feel overwhelmed with the increase of street homelessness in major American urban centers in recent years.

“More and more people are seeking out our services,” Farrell said. “We're now totally stretched, completely stretched” — financially, emotionally, and physically.

Stretched is also how public officials feel. With thousands now living on the streets in Los Angeles, the city's mayor, Eric Garcetti, tried to draw attention to the problem prior to a Dec. 19 Democratic presidential primary debate held in Los Angeles.

“Housing is no less of a fundamental need than regular meals or accessible medical care,” he said, “and it deserves to dominate the national conversation about our country's future.”

The issue is starting to attract international attention, too: The United Nations estimates that 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing worldwide, and 15 million people are forcefully evicted each year. The challenges of affordable housing and homelessness will take center stage at the Feb. 10-19 meetings of the United Nations' Commission for Social Development, one of the U.N.'s main bodies dealing with development issues.

Though housing is enshrined as a human right in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the meeting



Mercy Sr. Helen Amos is a longtime housing and homelessness activist in Baltimore, Maryland. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

marks the first time the world body will tackle the issue head-on as a priority for action. And it comes as the U.N. continues its ambitious goal of eliminating world poverty by the year 2030 through its 17 sustainable development goals.

Back in Los Angeles, 68-year-old Siti Pasinah recounts experiences of escaping an 18-hour-a-day housekeeping job in Los Angeles after the household did not pay her for her work. She was also physically abused and had her passport taken from her.

Escaping her abusive situation left Pasinah homeless.



Sr. Judy Vaughn, right, with Siti Pasinah, left, who used to be homeless, and Anh Le, Alexandria House's development associate, at the offices of Alexandria House, a Los Angeles transitional housing facility. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"Oh, my God, it's hard," Pasinah said.

Eventually, she found stability through Alexandria House, a transitional residence in Los Angeles for women who have experienced trafficking or domestic violence. Pasinah lived at Alexandria House from 1999 to 2000, moved to affordable housing near the residence in 2000 and eventually settled in a "permanent supportive apartment building" developed by Alexandria House in 2007.

One of Alexandria House's missions is to help women like Pasinah move from emergency situations to permanent housing. Sr. Judy Vaughn, Alexandria House's founding director, says Alexandria House is in touch with more

than 100 of the 200 single women and families who have moved through the program since its founding in 1996.

"Of this number, 90% have remained in permanent housing," she said.

But for agencies like Vaughan's, the challenges remain acute: Homelessness is becoming more visible given the realities of gentrification, the process by which onetime poorer urban areas become destination neighborhoods for wealthier residents, often forcing longtime residents to leave.

"The struggle of people on the streets is all around us," said Vaughan, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

"Our vocation has always been drawn to the pain of the world," said Sr. Simone Campbell, who heads the Washington, D.C.-based Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. "Jesus always works toward those who are marginalized. And who is more marginalized in our society than those who don't have a roof over their heads?"

Campbell, interviewed while on a "listening tour" of rural America with colleagues in mid-January, noted that especially in the case of homelessness, "individual hearts [of sisters] are broken open so that sisters can't be silenced in the face of need."

Campbell said the issue of homelessness and affordable housing is an area of need "where there is the least amount of imagination" in terms of public policy.

"The nation is still using the same policy and problem-solving that we did in the 1960s and '70s. I believe that we need to be more imaginative in our approach to building homes," she said. "We need to prioritize something other than 'high-end condos.' Rather, we must focus on housing for the bottom 60% of our population who are priced out of the current market."

Campbell noted that homelessness affects rural areas, too. Challenges there include a lack of rental property and aging infrastructure, and many older, now-uninhabitable houses are in need of repair.

“As rural communities lose population, people can’t sell their homes,” she said. “So they walk away from them. They get dilapidated and used for bad purposes, like drug houses and meth production.”

FOR MILLIONS, FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS ARE NOT MET

Anyone who focuses on issues of social inequality ultimately comes up against the challenges of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing, said Sr. Veronica Brand, who represents the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary at the U.N.

Brand and other sisters whose advocacy work is based at the United Nations know the meetings this month are a starting point — the topic is complex and multi-layered. They note that some U.N. member states are likely to say homelessness is best addressed at local or perhaps national levels, not globally.

But Brand and others see global dimensions in the millions made homeless because of climate-crisis events or in “the global economic system that is promoting an ever-widening gap between rich and poor,” Brand said.

Central to Brand’s concern is that in such a system, “everything is treated as a commodity, including housing,” she said. Housing should be seen as a basic human right, and the “basic right to housing should not be dependent on markets,”

she added.

Policymakers at all levels need to acknowledge that “people are caught in a vicious circle of circumstances which prevent them from being self-reliant,” Brand said. In Brazil, she said, that means LGBT youth who become homeless after their families kick them out of their homes. Or those who live on the streets of large Brazilian cities, collecting recyclable plastics and cans. In Mozambique, it means thousands have been made homeless because of climate-induced floods.

“No one can escape the fact that many people in the world are not having some of their fundamental needs met,” Brand said.

None of the existing sustainable development goals deals explicitly with homelessness or affordable housing, though many of the goals touch on those challenges. Goal No. 11, for example, calls on U.N. member states to “ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrade slums.”

Leilani Farha, the United Nations special rapporteur on adequate housing, calls the February meetings a “strategic and important moment” as well as an opportunity “to bring the issue of homelessness to the attention of U.N. member states and to convey to the states the urgency of the violation of human rights caused by homelessness.”

Globally, she said, there is a “nearly universal





Sr. Veronica Brand represents the Religious at the Sacred Heart of Mary at the United Nations (GSR file photo)



Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA, a United Nations-based coalition of Catholic congregations focused on concerns of women, children, migrants and the environment (GSR file photo)

dynamic of wages being stagnant and rents escalating.” But there are other dynamics, too, such as equity firms and pension funds moving into buying up affordable housing stock and increasing prices.

“It’s a business model in which profit is being squeezed out of housing,” Farha said. “In large cities such as San Francisco, middle-class people were once able to afford an apartment at, say, \$1,000 a month. What has happened is that a building is bought, rents go up substantially and people can’t make their rent payments.

“Housing has long been commodified through mortgage systems, for example,” she said. But the current situation is different. It’s gone beyond commodification to financialization, where massive amounts of capital are being invested in real estate. Residential real estate is now the place to park, grow and leverage capital. That’s a new dynamic, and that’s what I’m worried about.”

There are other challenges ahead of the February meeting. For one, a document prepared for the U.N. meetings notes that “there is no universally agreed definition of homelessness.”

A group of experts, including Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Jean Quinn, met in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2019 and came up with a preliminary working definition: Homelessness is “a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety.”

Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA, a United Nations-based coalition of Catholic congregations focused on concerns of women, children, migrants and the environment, said she

hopes one of the outcomes of the U.N. meetings this month is a consensus about a definition. She said she also hopes the U.N. will take steps toward a universal count, or census, of homelessness.

“If you don’t have that, governments will put in something to suit themselves,” she said. And if there is not a common definition, “governments will create their own definition, making it hard to compare and combat the issues on homelessness globally.”

Quinn acknowledged that it is frustrating that, as the U.N. notes, the last time the United Nations attempted to count the global number of homeless people was in 2005, when it estimated that 100 million people were homeless. (UN-Habitat, the U.N. body that focuses on adequate shelter and the development of sustainable urban areas, uses a more recent estimate of 150 million.)

Quinn, who will be one of the featured speakers during the U.N. gathering, said she hopes the meetings will also call attention to a facet of homelessness that does not get the attention she believes it deserves: family homelessness.

She calls family homelessness “a hidden problem” that often involves head-of-household mothers and their children unable to find permanent housing, living in shelters, hostels, hotels or institutional settings and often “on the move.”

“We welcome that the U.N. is now talking about the issue,” said Quinn, a founder of Sophia Housing in her native Ireland, which describes itself as “a collaboration of religious and lay people working to support the ‘out of home.’”

HOMELESSNESS

A global problem affecting people with diverse economic, social and cultural backgrounds in both developed and developing countries

An estimated
1.6 BILLION PEOPLE

globally live in inadequate housing conditions.

That is more than

1 IN 5

ABOUT 15 MILLION PEOPLE

are forcibly evicted globally every year. That is equivalent to the entire population of Zimbabwe.

The United Nations estimates there are at least

150 MILLION PEOPLE

who are homeless globally.

ABOUT 22 MILLION PEOPLE

worldwide are displaced annually due to climate-related events.



70%

of the households that are homeless or live in inadequate housing globally are headed by women.

Source: U.N. Economic and Social Council and UN-Habitat.

—GSR/Toni-Ann Ortiz



People gather around a fire, the only permitted source of heat at the Oppenheimer Park homeless encampment, on Jan. 16, 2020, following a heavy snowfall in Vancouver, British Columbia. (CNS/Reuters/Jesse Winter)



A child sleeps in a tent April 4, 2017, at a shelter for people left homeless after mudslides in Mocoa, Colombia. (CNS/Reuters/Jaime Saldarriaga)

HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

It is not likely that the U.N.'s declaration that housing is a human right will gain much traction in the market-driven culture of United States, said Nan Roman, the president and chief executive officer of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a public education and advocacy organization. However, she and other advocates, like the sisters, believe "it should be a right. People have a right to basic human needs."

Her organization noted that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, called AHAR, said an estimated 567,715 people "were identified

homeless on a single night in 2019," representing "a 2.7 percent increase over 2018."

Given the increased visibility of street homelessness in large U.S. cities, this might be the time to broaden the parameters of the debate, she said.

Roman said people don't like to see other humans living on the streets: "It hurts their hearts to see it." She said she believes there is "still a tremendous amount of compassion and feeling that government has a role. We need to focus on that."

"In the U.S., we could ensure that everyone is housed," Roman said. "We could afford that, but it's a matter of priorities."



Men who are homeless are seen under a bridge Dec. 25, 2019, in Austin, Texas. (CNS/Bob Roller)



Tents on the streets of Los Angeles' Skid Row reveal some of the problems of homelessness in the United States' second-largest city. As many as 60,000 people may be living on the streets of Los Angeles at night. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, one of the co-founders of Project HOME in Philadelphia, meets clients at a Project HOME medical facility. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Roman said investing in more affordable housing could lower the economic and social costs of homelessness. As it is now, “there are costs to the economy, social costs, human costs. Thirty percent of homeless people in the United States have no shelter at all. This is a wealthy nation. That should be unacceptable to all of us.”

It is certainly unacceptable to the sisters working on the issue, a fact Roman acknowledged as she reflected on the upcoming U.N. meetings.

“Working to advance a social justice agenda at the U.N. requires tremendous attention to the details of process and the makeup of the various delegations and committees. It entails deliberation over text down to the individual words,” she said. “It involves persistence over months, or even years. It is not for the faint of heart, and the Catholic sisters most certainly are not that.”

One of the most visible sister-activists in the country is Sr. Mary Scullion, a member of the Sisters of Mercy and one of the co-founders of Project HOME in Philadelphia. While calling the overall problem of homelessness and housing affordability a complicated issue with many facets, Scullion also argued that at its roots, “poverty is the fundamental cause of homelessness.”

Philadelphia has seen a 10% annual rise in housing costs in recent years, making housing less and less accessible to those with lower incomes, Scullion said. A recent report noted that median rent in Philadelphia rose 3% from 2018 to 2019 and now stands \$1,614 per month, or \$19,368 per year. That is more than 30% of Philadelphia’s median household income of \$46,116, the rate often cited as the suggested portion of income used to pay for housing.

“Affordable housing is becoming scarcer,” Scullion said, “and safe, quality and affordable housing is becoming even scarcer.”

Scullion said she knows only the broad outlines of what will be discussed at the United Nations this month. But in terms of the United States, government policies and legislation tend



Left: David Brown helps manage a used-clothing boutique store in Philadelphia run by Project HOME and rents an apartment in a building the agency built. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Right: Tommy Dunphy's longstanding friendship with Sr. Margaret Farrell, a member of the Religious Sisters of Charity, spiritual ministry coordinator at Covenant House California in Los Angeles and frequent visitor to Skid Row, is important in his life. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



to be “bought and sold by moneyed interests today,” she said, citing the power and sway of such prominent figures as the Koch brothers.

Do you or other sisters in your community work in this ministry?

Something of a national consensus following World War II about the need for affordable housing for all has evaporated, she said. The landmark 1949 Housing Act, for example, declared that “the general welfare and security of the nation” required a “national housing policy to realize, as soon as feasible, the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”

Scullion said she believes the consensus began to fade during the 1980s, when Reagan administration policies began chipping away at the federal commitment to affordable housing, such as reducing federal subsidies for the construction of low-income housing.

“In the 1980s, housing policies were dismantled in certain ways,” she said. “Housing became more of a commodity and not a right.”

The result? A current social challenge and a feeling that “for ordinary citizens, it’s hard to see how we can influence policies since special interests have such power over public policy,” she said. “It’s not equal. It’s the world of lobbyists and special interests.”

Project HOME and the work of other groups have countered this trend. In addition to its immediate work of assisting those on the street,

Project HOME has, it says, “developed 832 units of affordable and supportive housing for persons who have experienced homelessness and low-income persons at-risk of homelessness in Philadelphia.” Its goal is to eventually complete 1,088 units of affordable housing in the near future; an additional 104 units are currently under construction.

Someone thankful for that work is David Brown, who helps manage a used-clothing boutique store run by Project HOME and rents an apartment in a building the agency built.

Brown, who used to be homeless, said it is no secret what homeless people need: a place to live and to find security and comfort.

“We don’t need shelters,” he said, adding that you can’t go to a job interview from a place that’s not clean and healthy. Housing will “help us navigate to get off the streets.”

“Folks like David want to work, pay rent, volunteer and be involved in making their communities better,” she said.

Like Dunphy in Los Angeles, Brown said he believes housing is the cornerstone for a dignified life.

“You have to start with housing,” he said. “Give us affordable housing.”



CHRIS HERLINGER is GSR international correspondent. His email address is cherlinger@ncronline.org.

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Jerico J. and Jasmine relaxing in front of Sacred Heart Convent after returning from a feeding center. They walk every day to different feeding centers carrying their two children and two bags of belongings. (Sujata Jena)

COLUMN: A journey with the homeless

Mar 9, 2020

by Sujata Jena

In Manila, the Philippines: I meet the homeless along the street, begging at doors, camping under the bridge, stopping vehicles on the road asking for coins, lying on the sidewalks — so frail and exposed to rain and sun.

I was prejudiced, skeptical and indifferent about them. I thought they were lazy, people with no dream and vision — until last May when I started to accompany them.

I was challenged by the mandates of our 2018 General Chapter of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, which prioritized our ministries with people who are poor, especially migrants, homeless and women.

Of a population of 106 million people in the Philippines, about 4.5 million are homeless; there

are about 3 million homeless people in Manila alone, possibly the most of any other city in the world. This shook me.

What could I do? How could I give a name and face to each of the homeless, hungry, sick and abandoned? I was only a student with little extra time. But since I was drawn to this cause, I tried to be with the homeless as much as possible.

I realize that the situation of poverty and homelessness is a huge social problem around the world. But when I meet them, I face fellow human beings, not some abstract “social problem.” The very phrase, “What would Jesus do at this scene?” haunted me.

I ventured to ask their names, age, where they came from, where they live (street, bridges, cemetery) and the reason they are on the streets.

Their stories are poignant. Each one has a unique story to tell about his/her reason to be



James Garcia, son of Lea Garcia, a homeless single mother, sleeping in front of a mini mart at 9 p.m. while his mother waits for the shop to close. (Sujata Jena)

homeless, how they were forced to leave distant rural villages to live on the city streets. I tried to listen to them with empathy.

Jerico J., 35, explained, “I left my province [rural village] because there was no food, money and a house for me to live. We are six children to fishing parents who lived in a small hut. Now everyone grew up and have [their] own families. I lost my boat to a typhoon. I cannot afford to buy one.”

Most are victims of circumstances. Poverty and unemployment are their main reasons for moving to the cities. Around 21.6% of the population live below the national poverty line in the Philippines, according to the Asian Development Bank Report 2018.

They are displaced due to natural disasters as well, or are forced to leave their home provinces and thrown out of their homes when the government wants their land for infrastructure projects. Having no title on their huts, (though their families have lived there for generations), they cannot produce a residential certificate.

The Philippines is a fractured democracy, where feudal practices persist and where the greater national budget is dedicated to servicing foreign debt and paying a bloated bureaucracy, or is wasted on fake or overpriced development projects.

After studying the issue, I am convinced that the government has barely scratched the surface in combating the issue. According to the people I listened to, the only anti-poverty scheme of the government, the 4 Ps (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program — a conditional cash transfer program of the Philippines) hardly benefited the extreme poor and homeless.

Many of the homeless are scavengers, rag pickers, construction workers, jasmine flower sellers, car park attendants, jeepney barkers, or tricycle drivers. About 250,000 Filipino children are living on the street, and parents use their children for begging.



Dominga Abinoha, 76, came to the city when she was 30 to get free treatment for her husband with cancer at the government hospital. (Sujata Jena)

Dominga Abinoha, now 76, came to Manila hoping to get a treatment in a government hospital for her husband who had cancer. The young couple and their 10-year-old ended up working in a piggery for several years, later as a laundrywoman and a scavenger.

“It was exhausting to walk miles barefoot for scavenging, as I was overweight and weak. But I needed to earn for my sick husband and dependent young daughter,” Dominga expressed with pain. Her husband died without treatment a few years back.



Raymundo F. Mesias, 58, came to the city at age 8 to look for food. For 50 years, he has been diligently scavenging in the supermarkets, restaurants and streets of Manila. The only belonging he has is a cariton (pushcart) where he collects garbage. He sleeps on the pavement. (Sujata Jena)



Marylin, left, a single mother with two children, fled domestic violence from a husband who was addicted to drugs; suffering from asthma, she felt weak and breathless and stopped to rest on the way to the Sacred Heart shrine feeding center. Sr. Sujata Jena asked the parish to provide Marylin with first-aid. (Sujata Jena)



Limiticia De la Cruz, left, and Leah Garcia wait in front of a mini-mart store at 9 p.m. They sleep on the street when the store closes down. Limiticia died Aug. 12, 2019, from an ovarian tumor. Leah Garcia, 34, has six children and scavenges around restaurants and supermarkets. The three youngest children go with her, and the older ones live with her former husband. (Sujata Jena)

There are no public water supplies and sanitation facilities in the city. They resort to open defecation.

Jasmine, a mother of two children, said that she uses paper or plastic for diapers, which are too expensive, and added, “We often get ill and have diarrhea all the time.”

“On Wednesday, we get a chance to take a bath, wash clothes and rest in the afternoon at the Holy Spirit Sisters’ center,” Jasmine said. Bahay Mapalad of the Holy Spirit Sisters is a place where homeless people can cook, wash, rest and renew.

The hungry and homeless survive on the mercy of churches, religious houses and kind-hearted individuals. Several churches provide food for the homeless on different days.

Other feeding centers operated by the Divine Word priests, Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary, and the Canossian Daughters of Charity serve in limited areas and are not accessible to the vast majority of poor and homeless people. The Society of St. Vincent Paul heads a federation for homelessness that shelters some indigenous homeless people. The federation works for the rights of the homeless throughout the country.

Besides being hungry, homeless people suffer from multiple infectious diseases due to weak immune systems and poor nutrition and hygiene. They have heart and lung diseases because of constant exposure to the heat and rain. They are exposed to abuse, harassment and sexual exploitation. They are victims of crime, human trafficking, torture and killings.

“The police are merciless. They remove and detain us anytime when the government hosts high-profile international events,” said Gloria C. Santos, a 55-year-old homeless woman.

Poverty and the number of homeless people will continue to rise unless the government introduces mainstream programs, such as food and income security, medical aid, social security and disability insurance.



Limiticia De la Cruz, 62, lived all her life in the street. She died Aug. 12, 2019. She had a special love for dogs and animals. She shared her begged food with the dogs every day and let the dogs rest beside her in the street. (Sujata Jena)



People who are homeless eat on Fridays at Sacred Heart Shrine Parish of the Divine Word Priest. (Sujata Jena)



Homeless people and people who scavenge receive food at the De Luna Center on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The owner is a president of an international construction firm and a born-again Christian who shares his blessings. (Sujata Jena)

As a religious, I am blessed with unmerited gifts and privileges. My engagement with homeless people increased my gratitude and helped me understand what it is to be homeless, hungry and lonely. I easily sympathize with them as I cannot imagine myself being hungry and sleeping on the pavement. It helps me to shift my focus away from myself and to be a hope and joy to others.

On evening walks, I meet many homeless families. The smiles on their faces warm my heart, and in return, I try to be a source of hope for them. Their names, faces and situations become vivid in my personal and community prayer.

As a trained social worker and a lawyer, I challenge myself on how to give or not to give, every time I face people begging. I am reminded of the saying: “Do not give them fish, instead teach them how to fish.”

I contemplate on what Jesus would do with the poor, homeless, the “third circle of Jesus’ disciples” — the crowd! He reached out to them with compassion, healed them, fed them and told them parables that gave hope. He did not judge them, nor did he instruct them to follow.

I resolve in faith to take care of our neighbors, visit the sick, help the poor and feed the hungry. It is a commitment that I like to renew daily.



SUJATA JENA is a member of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Congregation. She has a degree in social work and a law degree from Utkal University, Odisha, India. She has worked among Dalit and tribal women, children, and youth of the eastern Indian states of Odisha and West Bengal. Recently, she completed Missiology studies in Manila, Philippines. During her stay in Manila from July 2018 to December 2019, she voluntarily journeyed with the poor and homeless of Sacred Heart Barangay, Manila, Philippines. She has contributed to Global Sisters Report as a Matters India reporter.

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Sr. Caroline Ngatia shares breakfast with the street families in Nairobi, Kenya. The nun has been feeding the underprivileged children for years and, as a result, the kids simply call her “mum.” (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Demolition, family strife push boys to the streets of Nairobi

KWETU HOME OFFERS A HAVEN FOR SOME OF THE 60,000 STREET KIDS IN KENYA’S CAPITAL

Mar 9, 2020

by Doreen Ajiambo

NAIROBI, KENYA — It’s early in the morning and Sr. Caroline Ngatia walks the freezing streets of the capital here, looking for homeless children. As she makes her way through the busy crowds of the downtown business district, young street children emerge from cardboard boxes, doorways and cellars of the dilapidated buildings. The children fling themselves at her, seeking the companionship and love they otherwise lack.

Tens of thousands of children are living on the streets of Nairobi — some forced out by poverty, violent home lives and family breakups. Children

have lost their parents. And many families have been displaced by demolition of their homes and apartments to make way for a multimillion-dollar highway link to the Trans-African Highway. The government says the homes were built unsafely on public land, right-of-ways, wetlands and waterways without official approval.

Ngatia is confronting the problem of street children head on by providing meals, shelter and education for some of them.

“I always feel like crying whenever I see a child sleeping in the cold and without a meal,” said Ngatia, breaking down in tears and having to be comforted by some of the street children. “It is disheartening to see these children suffering.”



Srs. Caroline Ngatia (at left, in white veil) and Caroline Cheruiyot (far right) and members of the staff work together on behalf of the street children, some of whom are pictured here, at Kwetu Home of Peace in Nairobi, Kenya. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Ngatia runs Kwetu Home of Peace, where homeless boys ages 8-14 are plucked three times a year from the streets and slums in Nairobi and elsewhere and inducted into a process of reintegration. The goal is to reform and rehabilitate the boys through counseling, games, drama and useful life skills, such as house cleaning, agriculture and carpentry, she said.

In Kenya, girls are less likely to end up on the streets, due to legal protections and help from volunteer organizations working on their behalf. Conversely, boys are more often left to take care of themselves.

The sister says the displacement has complicated the rescue mission and spurred an increase in the number of street children.

“We have assisted families and rescued some of the children as a result of house demolition because they had nowhere to go,” said Ngatia of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sisters of Eldoret in Western Kenya. “I want to see these boys one day becoming productive members of society so that they can come back

and assist more street children and end the street families menace within the country.”

There are no official government figures on the number of homeless children in the East African country, despite the rising numbers of them in Kenya’s major cities and towns. However, an estimate by the London-based Consortium of Street Children puts the number at 250,000-300,000, with 60,000 in Nairobi alone.

Ngatia believes the number is much higher.

THE ROAD TO ENDING UP ON THE STREETS

Wearing gray, faded trousers with a black shirt, a boy named Evans sits quietly on garbage heaps at the infamous Dandora dumpsite on the outskirts of Nairobi. Amid swarms of flies, stench from rotting garbage and human waste, he narrates how he found himself in the streets after his family’s house was demolished in Kibera on June 21, 2018.

“We used to live in a shanty house where we could not pay rent,” said the 15-year-old boy, who joined the street early last year. “When



Thousands of families have been left homeless in Kayole slum in Nairobi, Kenya, as a result of demolition by the government to make way for a new highway link and housing developments. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

bulldozers kicked us out of the house, we were forced to spend five nights in the cold because my parents are poor and they couldn't afford to rent another house.”

Evans was taken to a neighbor to allow him to prepare for his national exams as his parents decided to go back to the village after being offered a lift by a good Samaritan, he said.

“The neighbor used to deny me food and beat me every day,” said Evans, who sat for his Grade 8 exams in November 2018. “When I finally finished my exams, she chased me away and I ended up on the street. I later heard that my mother and father had divorced and neither of them wanted to see me. I had no option but to stay on the streets and beg. I do all sorts of work to ensure I get something to eat.”

Activists and other leaders have condemned the evictions, but Kenyan officials said the people living in the areas earmarked for demolition were there illegally.

“They deserve to be treated in a humane manner because these are old women with their children,” said Esther Passaris, an opposition Member of Parliament representing Nairobi County. “Their houses were demolished in the dead of the night and families had to spend the night in the cold. We have to assist such families with food and try to help them resettle, otherwise

they will end up on the streets.”

Some families have not been resettled, forcing thousands of children onto the streets to fend for themselves and making it difficult for nongovernmental organizations to end the dangerous situation.

The boys on the street say they are exposed to starvation, violence, sexual exploitation, poor sanitation, substance abuse and emotional torture. Motorists often beat them up, Evans said, presuming they are looking to steal car parts, while others hurl insults at them whenever they ask for food or money.

Some of the boys fall prey to whatever diversions they can find.

A NEW HABIT FORMS

Mlango Kubwa, one of the fast-growing Nairobi suburbs, is home to thousands of street kids. Here, many of them sniff contentedly on their bottles of toxic glue, constantly walking the streets and alleys, scavenging for anything they can turn into cash and begging for a meal.

The teenagers hanging out together in Mlango Kubwa, however, are a different lot. Looking dazed, they rummage for food and discarded items to resell. Weary younger children sleep on the piles during the day.

These kids are sniffing jet fuel, which they call mssi in their hybrid slang. “We get it from town, we really do not know where it comes from and we do not ask. We just take it like people drink pombe [beer],” says one of the boys. “It gives me a high and helps me deal with stress in these bad streets.”

Jet fuel is now the intoxicant of choice among many street children. It looks like water and they carry it in small plastic bottles. Anyone who has some is revered here.

Most of the boys who use it have scars on their faces from falling flat after the dizzying effects of the first sniff, says Ngatia.

Thomas Ngumu, a psychologist at Kwetu Home, has tried to help them kick the habit.



A homeless boy sniffs toxic glue on the streets of Nairobi, Kenya. Street children do this to beat hunger pangs, stay warm and feel good from the high, but health officials warn that glue sniffing presents a serious danger to them. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

“It’s not an easy thing to do,” he said, shaking his head. “They are sniffing a new substance that turns them into near zombies.”

Jet fuel can render a user confused and hostile from hallucinations or can cause unconsciousness and rashes around the nose and mouth, Ngumu said, adding that it can result in death from suffocation caused by the chemical entering the lungs and central nervous system.

A GOVERNMENT STRUGGLE

Kenyan authorities have tried to rehabilitate street children from the major towns of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Eldoret, but their efforts have failed because of ineffective approaches, those working on the problem say. Street families normally would be detained and locked up. Soon after release, they would return to the streets and start over again.

For the last two years, officials in Nairobi have rescued more than 1,000 street children, with most of them taken to four government rehabilitation centers — in Shauri Moyo, Joseph Kang’ethe, Kayole and Bahati.

“We care for street children and my administration will continue to rehabilitate them,” said Mike Sonko, governor of Nairobi County. “When I was elected, I promised to

ensure all street children are taken to orphanages and rehabilitation centers. I’m going to fulfill my pledge.”

Sonko, a colorful national figure who is facing corruption charges, won a 2019 award sponsored by the Kenya Red Cross and United Nations Volunteers for promoting volunteering.

Ngatia reported that last year the government disbursed more than \$30,000 to assist some of the street children at her center.

However, she said, for the government to address the current crisis, it must first tackle the factors that push children to the streets.

“There are reasons why street children have no home and sleep on pavements,” said Ngatia, who is also a trained teacher. “Let’s deal with the root causes and stop associating street families with drug abuse,” she said, conceding that the homeless sometimes turn to drugs to ease their lot.

She urged the government to invest in social protection and create employment for young people to avoid a situation where children move from rural areas to towns to look for jobs but end up on the streets.

Sr. Caroline Cheruiyot, who works at Kwetu Home of Peace as a counselor, said their intention is to mentor the boys to achieve their dreams



A street child sleeps on a sidewalk in Nairobi, Kenya. There are many socioeconomic factors in families that contribute to the increase of street children in Kenya. These include poverty, lawlessness, alcohol and drug abuse, social permissiveness, family breakup and child abuse. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



Street children sleep on pavement. Plastic bottles from which they sniff glue are discarded in the area. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

by offering them education and identifying and developing their talents. Street children need total rehabilitation, which involves a range of activities, such as providing them with life skills, counseling, and recreational activities to enable them to shed drugs and street habits, she said.

A sign overlooking the common area at Kwetu advises, “Jump, Shout, But Do Not Sin.”

“When these children come here, they are taught the way to live life like normal people,” said Cheruiyot, who is also a communications lecturer at Strathmore University in Nairobi. “We rescue, rehabilitate and reintegrate them. We specifically deal with the boys because they are not well taken care of like the girls.”

The sisters have some success stories about former street children who are pursuing their university education, and others own and manage businesses.

Paul Thuo, a former street boy, is now pursuing his university education after he was rescued by the sisters from the streets and taken to Kwetu when he was young. His parents died and he was forced to live with his aunt who he

says used to beat him and hurl abuses at him.

“Life was unbearable and I had to run from home and start providing for myself,” the 20-year-old said, adding that his aunt used to leave him in the house without food. “I thank the sisters for changing my life. I will commit to assisting street children after I complete my education.”

Ngatia says her center is able to take in only 60 boys every four months. But it’s a drop in the ocean, and most of these children have no help at all, she adds.

“It’s our desire to take everyone from the street, but our biggest problem is funding,” she said, noting that many donors prefer supporting girls rather than boys. “I have a dream that one day when we come together as a country, we will end the street families menace.”



DOREEN AJIAMBO is the Africa/Middle East correspondent for Global Sisters Report.

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Chicago Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland with a client of Grand Valley Catholic Outreach in Grand Junction, Colorado, where Bland is executive director (Courtesy of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago)

Nowhere to go: Young people cope with homelessness in the US

Apr 6, 2020

by **Dan Stockman**

LOUISVILLE, KY. — Roan Head is bent over the table, carefully making ladder stitches in tiny fabric pillows about the size of a pack of cigarettes and talking about his history of mental health issues.

When the pillow is nearly done, he fills it with rice, then stitches it closed: It's a hand warmer that with 30 seconds in the microwave will give 30 minutes of heat — a small comfort to someone on the street with nowhere to go.

Head, 22, is on staff at the YMCA Safe Place Services day shelter for 18- to 24-year-olds in central Louisville, not far from where

millionaires gamble on the “sport of kings” at Churchill Downs. But he started as a client.

When he was released from a mental hospital in the fall of 2017, Head knew he couldn't go back to where he had been living, which was with an uncle who was only making things worse.

“He would say, ‘If you want to kill yourself, go ahead, and I'll help you,’” Head says. “Eventually, I tried.”

So when he was released, he had nowhere to go.

“Living on the streets was easier than where I was coming from,” he says.

On any given night in the United States, 41,000 unaccompanied youth ages 13-25 are without a home. And on all of those nights,



YMCA Safe Place Services staff member Roan Head sews hand warmers for the day shelter’s clients in Louisville, Kentucky. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

Catholic women religious are working to shelter them, feed them, and protect them.

Within days of his release from the hospital, Head found Safe Place Services and its youth development coordinator, Sr. Corbin Hannah, a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods.

He began working at a grocery store and was able to afford housing. A case manager at Safe Place helped him get certified as a peer supporter, which gave him the opportunity to share the things he had learned with other clients. This led to an internship at the shelter and, eventually, a permanent position.

“My ability to cope on a day-to-day basis is much better,” Head says. “Overall, my outlook is positive. I believe there can be and will be a good future.”

Most of the clients at Safe Place work, Hannah says, yet they’re homeless.

And now, with the COVID-19 pandemic

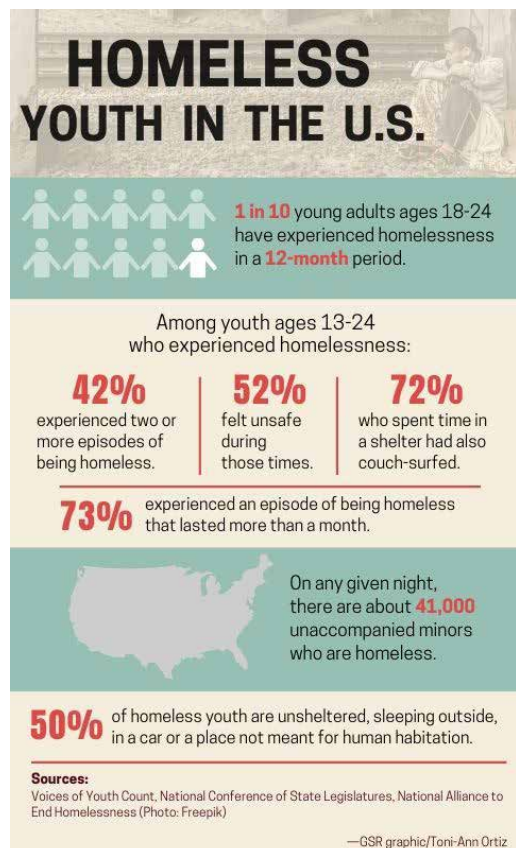
closing businesses, jobs have disappeared. The temporary jobs many depend on — working at events, stadiums or catering — are nonexistent. But the day shelter is considered an essential service and continues to operate, Hannah says.

The shelter is big enough to maintain social distancing unless there are more than 10 clients at a time.

“The homeless don’t have the luxury of staying home or having social isolation,” she says. “They’re much more vulnerable.”

Not only do Safe Place’s clients struggle to find jobs that pay a living wage, but there is an acute shortage of affordable housing.

According to a 2019 study by the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund, the city has only enough affordable housing units for 54% of the city’s families that live below the federal poverty line, currently about \$26,000 a year for a family of four. To provide affordable housing for all families below the poverty line, the city would need an additional 31,000 affordable homes.



The National Low Income Housing Coalition says that to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Louisville, a worker must make at least \$13.23 an hour. The minimum wage in Kentucky is \$7.25.

The problem is not only in Louisville.

Sr. LaVern Olberding, a Sister of St. Francis of Clinton, Iowa, ministers in La Mesa, California, where she volunteers at an interfaith homeless shelter. One of the families she sees often is a father and two sons who live in their car.

“He keeps them in soccer, keeps them in school, he has a job,” Olberding says. “The sacrifices these parents go through to give their kids as normal a life as possible is amazing.”

They might appear to blend in seamlessly with those around them, she says, but they cannot find housing they can afford.

“I don’t think there’s a single child that’s been in one of these situations that I would have picked out as homeless or as living outdoors or as disadvantaged,” Olberding says. “It tears me apart.”

And it is not only large, urban areas. Voices of Youth Count, an initiative of Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, found homelessness rates of both youth and young adults nearly identical in rural and urban counties: 4% for youth ages 13-17 and 9% for young adults ages 18-25.

Sr. Barb Freemyer, a Sister of Mercy, works at Stephen Center in Omaha, Nebraska, which offers emergency shelter, permanent supportive housing and transitional living to those with nowhere to go. Nebraska public schools reported more than 3,400 students — about 1% of the state’s 319,000 students — experienced homelessness over the course of the 2016-17 school year.

“It’s everywhere,” Freemyer says. “It’s all over.”

‘YOU ARE TOTALLY BROKEN’

Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland is executive director of Grand Valley Catholic Outreach in Grand Junction, Colorado, where the National Low Income Housing Coalition reports a worker

making the state minimum wage of \$12 per hour would have to work 73 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment.

Each child that comes to Grand Valley Catholic Outreach gets a new book while their parents seek services. Bland says they give out about 1,500 books a year, not only for the child’s growth and development, but to help calm a child traumatized by what their family is experiencing.

And when it comes to homelessness among young people, trauma is a constant.

Bland says mental illness can often lead to homelessness, which leads to the trauma of living on the streets. But the trauma of living on the streets can also lead to mental illness, even among those who did not have those issues when they lost their home.

Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland talks about the links between homelessness, mental illness by National Catholic Reporter

Chicago Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland, executive director of Grand Valley Catholic Outreach in Grand Junction, Colorado, talks about the links between homelessness and mental illness.

“What we’ve noticed over the years is that people who find themselves on the streets and it seems a dead end to them, that’s when mental illness really escalates,” Bland says. “So yes, there may be some people on the streets because of mental illness, but there are others who become mentally ill because of the trauma they experience just living on the streets — especially women.”

Freemyer says children and young adults are resilient, but sustained trauma can have profound effects on development.

“I think it doesn’t matter your age. What matters is that you are totally broken,” Freemyer says. “There’s also probably addiction and alcohol issues, and if you stay on the street too long, all of that is heightened. ... Either one precipitates homelessness, or they grow as they stay out on the street.”

EVERY SITUATION IS COMPLEX

In Louisville, Troy (who asked to use a pseudonym because of the stigma attached to homelessness) has stopped into Safe Place to shower and do some laundry. He's been working as a dishwasher at a chain restaurant and has finally secured an apartment. But he can't move in.

"They told me there's a cockroach problem, so I have to wait," Troy says.

Rent is only the first step: He has no furniture, no dishes, no can opener. So while he waits to move in, he's trying to save money for the things he'll need to make it happen.

Even youth who were part of a state safety net are at risk of living on the streets.

"We see a variety of situations," Hannah says. "Some have aged out of foster care. Others had family conflicts over either sexual orientation or gender identity. Others have addictions, or their parents do, and they left as soon as they turned 18."

According to Covenant House, which serves homeless youth in New York City, more than 50% of those aging out of foster care or juvenile justice systems when they turn 18 will be homeless within six months.



Troy (not his real name), left, is a client at YMCA Safe Place Services in Louisville, Kentucky, where Providence Sr. Corbin Hannah, right, is youth development coordinator. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

Voices of Youth Count found that LGBT youth are 120% more likely to become homeless than their peers. Those from households with an annual income of less than \$24,000 are 162% more likely to face homelessness. Youth who are single parents are three times more likely to be homeless, and youth without a high school diploma or GED are 346% more likely to be on the streets.

Every situation is unique, but more importantly, every situation is complex. And the complexity grows when young people are on the street.

"They don't trust people. They get kicked out of places because of their behavior," Hannah says. They don't have their birth certificates or Social Security numbers or identification, all of which they need to get a job. They don't have transportation or a place to shower or wash their clothes. If they have any valuables at all, they have nowhere to keep them."

In 2015, Sr. Pat Bombard, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, helped coordinate a group of faculty and staff at DePaul University in Chicago to address the issue of homeless students. Bombard is the director of Vincent on Leadership: The Hay Project, a research group on campus that studies ways to solve problems.

An estimated 50 students each academic quarter are homeless at the Catholic university, where tuition is about \$40,000 a year. Those who lose their housing because they are failing academically or falling behind on tuition and fees couch-surf or live in cars, Bombard says.

The group Bombard put together found there are at least 15 factors that can lead to homelessness: for example, not knowing how to do long-term planning, having no place to go when the dorm closes over holiday breaks, or having to commute from unsafe neighborhoods. It also found a list of 11 resources that are essential for getting and staying out of homelessness, such as a work schedule that allows for internships or group projects outside of class as well as



Chicago Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland, left, in her office at Grand Valley Catholic Outreach in Grand Junction, Colorado, where she is executive director (Courtesy of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago)

understanding how to interact with faculty and meet university expectations.

“There may be present a certain expectation, mental model, or image in the mind of faculty and staff of how a successful college or university undergraduate student will behave,” Bombard wrote in an email. “However, today’s college and university student population includes many types of non-traditional students, in particular low-income students who may also be working adults and young parents.”

Students may have received scholarships and financial aid to cover tuition, but they may not have any resources for daily life.

“[A] significant learning was a definition of poverty that revolves around lack of resources and the instability in one’s life resulting from that lack,” Bombard wrote. “In addition to housing, many students also lack food, winter clothing, or even something as simple as laundry soap.”

Lacking the basics also affects those who are homeless with addictions. Bland says many young people have moved to Colorado, one of the first states in the country to legalize recreational

marijuana, thinking it will be easy to buy drugs. Then they run out of money.

“[Addiction] is just destroying people,” Bland said.

The local supply of affordable housing is low, but instead of building more, the local housing authority had to spend \$2 million to renovate an existing housing complex because of meth use and manufacture in the apartments there.

‘THEY’VE LEARNED NOT TO TRUST’

Those who are made homeless also lose something just as critical as shelter, food and hygiene opportunities, Hannah says: community.

“The power of community to transform and heal someone is astounding,” Hannah says. “That’s what they need. Sure, they could use a job, but they need love and connectedness.”

And yet engagement can be hard with people who are homeless because they do not trust easily, Hannah says. “A lot of them have given up and resigned themselves to being homeless or couch surfing.”

That’s true even on a college campus, Bombard



Hand-warmers sewn by YMCA Safe Place Services staff member Roan Head await their first use by the day shelter's clients in Louisville, Kentucky. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

wrote. You cannot assume that if someone loses his or her dorm room or apartment, they have anywhere to turn.

“Not every college student today has a loving, supportive home to return to during academic breaks when university housing shuts down,” Bombard wrote. “For example, the student may come from an abusive, or unaccepting family and choose not to return. Parents may have ‘downsized’ their own home and no longer have space to welcome back their young adult child.”

A lack of connection can lead to homelessness in other ways, too.

“We found that at DePaul there are indeed many resources already in place to assist low-income and first-generation students,” Bombard wrote. “However, what students themselves and staff told us is that often there are emotional and psychological barriers within the students that prevent them from seeking the help they need. Students may not have the self-confidence to enter an office and approach adult faculty or staff to ask for help. Students also may be too embarrassed to ask for help, from staff or other students. They may not want others to know their situation, perhaps until it becomes critical.”

Safe Places in Louisville works hard to build and maintain those connections. There is an

art corner and lots of puzzles — not just to give clients something to do, but to help them lower their defenses.

“A lot of times, when someone comes in really agitated, you can say, ‘Let’s come over here and color,’ “ Hannah says. “Puzzles are a great way to calm down and then begin to talk and engage with someone.”

Community also means helping clients navigate social programs.

“The systems are not really designed to help, in my opinion,” Hannah says. “To get food stamps in Kentucky, you have to work at least 20 hours a week. We had a client who started going to college, and you think that’s a great thing, but now they can’t work as much, so they can’t get food stamps. They put up barriers. ... They create systems that basically shame you for reaching out for help.”

Her four years at Safe Place have given her a lot of sleepless nights, Hannah says, but they have also taught her much about God and herself.

“Where I see God most in this ministry is just by the connections clients experience when they start seeing the good in themselves,” she says. “They’ve experienced so much in their lives. They have walls and moats around their heart. ... It shows me how important community is. It doesn’t have to be your biological family. It can be your chosen family: the people who pick you up when you fall, who see the goodness in you, who model love and truthfulness for you.”



DAN STOCKMAN is national correspondent for *Global Sisters Report*. His email address is dstockman@ncronline.org.

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Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa hosts a December 2014 gathering in her home in Bridgeport, Connecticut, for women she ministers to. (Provided photo)

Q & A with Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa, seeing beauty, God in people living on the streets

Apr 7, 2020

by Soli Salgado

Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa remembers being nervous around homeless people before she started her ministry, usually crossing the street if she saw them on a corner and it was getting dark.

“No more,” she said.

After nine years ministering to people on the street, “I know the goodness in all these folks,” she said. “I don’t care how many times they went to prison, how many years they spent in prison, or why they were there. There is such goodness in all of us, and I’m so privileged to see that in these folks.”

At first, Boffa’s tending to people who are homeless meant going to downtown Bridgeport, Connecticut, striking up conversations and hoping to affirm them by listening to their worries, finding them in soup kitchens, rehab centers or street corners, simply meeting them where they were.

Today, her ministry has escalated to addressing two particular unmet needs for those in poverty: a spiritual retreat and a furniture drive she manages for those who recently moved from living on the streets and into apartments but who are unable to fill them.

Boffa had been in education for 50 years as an inner-city teacher, principal and coordinator of an adult literacy program. But eventually, she

felt a pull in her heart to do something new, and “knowing that’s where God works,” she chose to follow that lead, she said.

Inspired by her congregation’s foundress, Catherine McAuley, who Boffa said “was always busy looking for unmet needs,” Boffa decided to minister to the spiritual needs of those who are homeless, something Bridgeport lacked.

Twice a year for men and twice a year for women, Boffa runs a seaside retreat at Mercy by the Sea in Madison, Connecticut, where she takes 10 to 15 individuals who live on the streets and gives them a chance to “pray together and pray alone,” she said.

She also runs a popular weekly bingo that keeps people who are homeless busy between 1 and 4:30 p.m., when the soup kitchens have closed but the shelters haven’t opened. Bingo time gives 50 to 60 consistent participants each week an opportunity to laugh together and socialize, and to win donated prizes.

In a conversation with Global Sisters Report, Boffa reflected on the impact these economically poor individuals have had on her life, how the lack of social support feeds a cycle of homelessness, and her new appreciation for beauty. A lot of

those insights are through experiences with her furniture drive, which she started about eight years ago.

Boffa: One day, some gal asked me for a table, and I got her a table. That grew into what could be today a full-time business if I let it. That need is tremendously great. When folks finally, after being homeless, get an apartment, they often spend weeks where they have nothing. The caseworkers get them apartments but are so frustrated they can’t do anything to help them fill them. People are living in their apartments with not even a mug or spoon, and of course not a bed.

We’re in the wealthiest county in the country, and people are very generous. When they have furniture to give me, I have volunteers with trucks help me pick up the furniture, and then we deliver it — furniture, bedding, anything for their kitchen, bathroom towels — so we can completely fill their apartment to make it cozy, comfortable and pretty.

It’s not just that it would be nice for them to have a nice apartment. Picture a young man or woman who gets one of these apartments after being homeless, and it’s empty. Day after day, night after night, there’s nothing; you’re lying on the floor, there’s no television at night. You don’t want to go out into the night because you want to stay safe and start a new life, and that’s tough. The temptation is to go back out on the streets, find something to do, and then they get into trouble again. Finding, as quickly as we can, ways to make their new apartment cozy and a place where they want to stay helps in enormous ways.

It feels wonderful to see relief on their faces because they have a home now that looks like a happy home. It’s not an apartment, but a home.

GSR: Tell me a memorable story of redemption or a particular turnaround that stayed with you.

There are so many stories of appreciation or



Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa coordinates a spiritual retreat four times a year for the individuals she meets through her street ministry. Two retreats a year are devoted to men, and another two are for women, with one being an overnight and one being a daylong retreat for each. (Provided photo)



The seaside spiritual retreats that Boffa organizes are highly anticipated getaways for the individuals invited. It's "what they talk about all the time," she said. (Provided photo)

gratitude for the time they have at the retreat. Many times, they're very lonely and discouraged or they have poor health.

I'm picturing them now, sitting around the circles through the years. It's an opportunity to share with one another and affirm each other in that circle so that they go home feeling like they have a brotherhood or a sisterhood on the streets.

That's the difference I see when they're back in Bridgeport. Sharing together, laughing together, eating together, praying together, enjoying the beauty together: They form a connection when they're back on the streets, meeting each other. I see them hug each other differently.

Many times, they cry at the retreat; they don't want to go back to Bridgeport because they feel like new people, and they're afraid they'll be like their old selves again.

Do you typically follow up with the people you minister to?

Constantly. I'm still in touch with all of them. They all have my phone number, and they know they can call me at any time. We're friends now. I can't tell you how many have called me [throughout the coronavirus pandemic] to make sure that I'm OK because I'm "old," as they tell me.

There are some folks who you know they'll fall back again, but it's because they don't have support systems. I have a friend who has money, and one of her kids got into a mess with a boyfriend and drugs. She ended up in the right place to get help, but it was because of her parents. Her parents knew what do, and she's doing just fine. They kept her out of prison.

But the folks I'm with, they don't have that. And because they have no support, they end up falling back. And that discouragement, that self-defeat, that sense of failure — that's devastating.

Tell me what these individuals have taught you, or how this ministry has affected your perspective on what it means to be homeless or in need.

I don't judge folks anymore, or at least I try not to, and certainly not to the degree I used to. It's because I see the goodness in their faces.

One of my first feelings when I was just starting out, it was maybe day one or day two, I was entering a soup kitchen, and I just felt something. I hadn't even spoken to anyone, but I felt something so beautiful being present in that room, and I just know it was the spirit of God being present in all those folks. I know that sounds kind of "pretty," but it was very real for me.

So, what did I learn? I've learned there's goodness in all of us, no matter how our lives turn out. There's something deeper.

What has it taught you regarding the structural challenges for helping those who are poor?

There's just not enough money thrown our way. We in America don't need to have anybody on the streets who doesn't want to be. Down in Bridgeport, we can't get anybody into shelters; there's a waiting list. We shouldn't be focusing on shelters, anyway. We should be focusing on homes or apartments for people to live in because that's the dignified thing to do.

There are lots of wonderful caseworkers out here who are trying so hard but are frustrated because there isn't enough sent our way to get folks on their feet. People think folks are on the streets because they want to be. No, no, no.

Has coronavirus affected your ministry at all?

I'm trying to slow down. I have loads of [fast-food] gift cards people have given me. People are hungry right now because soup kitchens aren't able to do what they did, so I've been giving out cards.

How has this ministry influenced your own spirituality?

It certainly has deepened my realization of God being present in all our lives. Through thick and thin, despite the turbulence in some of these lives, I realize God is present. And when I speak of that to these folks, it brings them peace. They are very faithful people.

One way it's made a difference for me spiritually is that now I think in terms of things that are beautiful. They taught me how beauty touches all of us. I know the retreats could be anywhere — we could do it in a closet — but there's something about the beauty of nature, God's beauty, that touches us all so deeply, no matter who we are, our age or color or how rich or poor we are. I think that's very much what happens in part with the retreat. We're just enthralled with the beauty of God there, and it can't help but make a difference in our lives.



Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa with a friend she met through her street ministry (Provided photo)



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COLUMN: Strong bonds on the verge of being destroyed

Apr 30, 2020

by Dorothy Fernandes

On the journey of life, when a child is born there's great joy and excitement. However, as the child grows, she gradually imbibes values from the ones who are very close to her. Her circle of influence increases; for most women across the globe, the adjustment process is always a great challenge. Especially if she becomes a young bride, she is constantly learning and trying to learn more from the lessons of life.

The many women with whom I have been blessed to work have given me an opportunity to enter into their world. Very early in my life, in an institutional environment teaching in a school, it was a different group of women with whom I was engaged, who embodied motherly qualities in their being. The beauty of a mother

and her sensitivity to the needs of her children, her husband and last of all to herself, is really remarkable.

This characteristic is also true of women who are living on the periphery of society. The last three decades of my life have brought me very close to women who struggle day in and day out, but usually with broad smiles on their faces. One of the biggest struggles that the women in the slums are now facing is eviction — displacement with no alternative. This is a very dangerous situation because the most vulnerable become even more vulnerable, with no security whatsoever. There are many myths held by bureaucrats and the government that make them think evicting people is so easy. They believe strongly that these people have migrated to the city only recently. The bureaucrats are determined to not learn the truth — because the

truth would invite them to change their mindset and act differently.

As the encroachment drive begins the people who live on the periphery are in constant fear about when their huts will be demolished. This insecurity and uncertainty looms above them and they are unable to live a regular life. There are even stories of people going hungry because they are afraid to go to work, afraid that their homes will be demolished and their few possessions stolen while they are away. I would like to share the stories of some women I know, describing their fears and apprehensions.

Rukmani Devi is a resident of Sahgaadi Masjid, about 60 years of age. She came to this site as a young girl, when her parents worked in what is now the zoo, planting saplings which have become huge trees today. In 1997 she was identified as an animator (local leader), and trained by the Patna District magistrate office to represent her people. Over the years she has become a powerful leader and has kept the community together. She has stood as a strong rock and — though uneducated — she has vast knowledge and is attentive to what is happening around her. She is an exceptional person who can address a gathering with confidence.

The local community has planned many strategies and Rukmani is in the frontline guiding her community and saving them from the officials who come to demolish the slums. As is customary, the community even organized a special prayer ceremony, known as havan. A kind of tent is erected and the pictures of the Hindu gods are placed in the middle; a fire is kept burning for eight hours while women, men and children go around the fire chanting the name of Shri Ram. They were leaving no stone unturned, for they did not want to take chances. The next day after the havan, the entire community assembled again to oppose the bulldozer.

As the community sat watching and waiting, slowly their voices got loud and their sobs got louder. Each one was wondering what the future

had in store, fearing that the relationships of many decades would be destroyed. These people have lived together as a community for decades and have grown older together, and the very thought that they will be separated disturbs them. As they shared their stories of growing up, and struggled to find meaning in life, their bonds deepened. Now a time has come when this very strong bond is in danger.

For the government and officials only look at development as the key to the future; but to people who live on the periphery — who have shared their joys and sorrows and grown up together — it makes a big difference. It seems as if they are being uprooted; their history being destroyed.

Lakshmi, another woman, comes forward and cries “Where will we go? How will we live without one another ... we knew everything about each other? How will we live confined to a room or without the open space that we were used to?”

As the stories of pain poured in, it was difficult for me to hold back my tears. For they were speaking the truth, and I could sense the pain that they were going through. Alas! If only the officials could walk in the shoes of these people; if only they had a heart of flesh instead of stone.

I find it very difficult to comprehend this: How can people who come to conduct the demolition operation leave people under the open sky with only a plastic sheet to protect them from the falling dew? In the process, a 25-day-old baby girl died. It did not make a difference to anyone. Has human life become so cheap ... or is it just the lives of those who belong to the low-income group?

Knocking at every door, trying to meet every official, only to be told there is “no room in the inn” ... so surprising that in a democracy like ours in India even the head of state does not take responsibility. I wonder, what will happen in the future?



Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa with a friend she met through her street ministry (Provided photo)

As I awaited the birth of Jesus last Christmas, I felt there was no place for the poor in our city, there was no room in the inn! It seems that the power of money and decision-making takes priority. Is life just about money and power? Do we really mean it when we talk about the sacredness of relationships? Why is there no one to speak and act on behalf of the poor?



DOROTHY FERNANDES, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is a social activist who has been working in Patna since 1997 with communities on the periphery, with the goal of making their cities inclusive, so that no one is left behind. She also serves as the chairperson of the Women's Commission for the Archdiocese of Patna and is the advisory member of the social wing of the archdiocese – Forum for Social Initiatives.

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Wanda Rodríguez and her son, Steven, outside their home in Guánica, where Wanda has lived for 46 years.
(GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

Aftershocks and anxiety: Puerto Ricans distrust homes after devastating earthquake

May 14, 2020

by Soli Salgado

GUÁNICA, PUERTO RICO — The patch of land just off a highway exit between Guánica and Ponce, Puerto Rico, is where Maribel Martínez has her car parked indefinitely. It's also where she's been living for a few weeks — and will live indefinitely.

Since a 6.4-magnitude earthquake rocked the southwest region of the island Jan. 7, she hasn't re-entered her home, leaving behind all her belongings, including identification and medications for her cancer treatment.

"It's been incredibly difficult," Martínez told Global Sisters Report. "I don't sleep. I have panic

attacks. I feel so impotent. I've fallen into a crisis and feel like I can't get out. I'm not used to living like this: dirty. My whole life has been changed. ... I keep thinking how I'd rather die of my cancer than buried alive in rubble."

A little over two years into the island's slow recovery following Hurricane Maria in September 2017, the earthquake that struck Puerto Rico was unlike anything it's known since the San Fermín earthquake of 1918. The New York Times reported that the Puerto Rico Department of Housing estimates that roughly 8,300 houses were damaged in the earthquake, with about 2,500 left uninhabitable. Thousands of people have been forced to live in tents until either their homes are repaired or they find a new one.

The “deafening sound” that woke Martínez up at precisely 4:57 in the morning has so haunted her that she sought out a psychologist, she said. “I remember waking up and honestly thinking that my roof would cave on me” before she ran to her neighbor’s, crying and empty-handed.

Though she spent a few weeks in a local refuge center for earthquake victims, because of her complicated health conditions, she was told to relocate. She chose to live out of her car so she would not waste gas driving to her various doctors’ offices.

The earthquake most affected 16 southern towns, including the cities of Ponce, Guánica, Guayanilla and Yauco. That’s where Sr. Mildred Vázquez, who lives in Ponce, takes her ministry.

Vázquez, who belongs to the Siervas Misioneras de la Santísima Trinidad (Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity), is the director of Ponce’s Centros Sor Isolina Ferré. The center works in education, violence prevention, economic development, and community action. Following natural disasters, various committees scout local needs, reaching out to government agencies or collecting donations on behalf of affected families. Even in the midst of a pandemic, their services and outreach have not stopped.

Shalena Rodríguez, who spearheads the center’s community outreach in Guánica, had learned of Martínez’s case and organized donations to help her buy time as she figures out her next move. Handing her a case of water bottles Feb. 22, Rodríguez assured a tearful Martínez that she was not forgotten.

“We are here, and you are not alone,” she told her.

After the earthquake, Martínez’s car held nothing but blankets and some snacks. It was through Rodríguez that she received a \$50 gift card to Walmart, allowing her to buy a fresh set of clothes and some nonperishable food a few weeks later.

“Never in my life did I think I would have to prepare myself for this, that I’d be living like



Since Maribel Martínez’s home was destroyed in the Jan. 7 earthquake, she’s been living out of her car by a highway exit. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Shalena Rodríguez, right, has been providing Maribel Martínez, left, with gift cards and nonperishables every few days as part of her relief work with the Centros Sor Isolina Ferré. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Sr. Mildred Vázquez of the Siervas Misioneras de la Santísima Trinidad (Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity) is the director of the Centros Sor Isolina Ferré in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Part of the center’s work is identifying victims of the earthquake and organizing relief. Here, she and Shalena Rodríguez, right, pray with Maribel Martínez after providing her with water, gift cards and snacks. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Outside Wanda Rodríguez’s home with the relief team, from left: Shalena Rodríguez; Juan Pablo Díaz Fortes; Wanda Rodríguez; Wanda’s son, Steven; and Sr. Mildred Vázquez of the Siervas Misioneras de la Santísima Trinidad (Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity). (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

this,” she said. “But I couldn’t have prepared because it never occurred to me that I’d ever be living like this.”

The people of Guánica, the epicenter of the earthquake, mainly followed one of two paths after Jan. 7. They either fled the town (or Puerto Rico entirely) once their homes or businesses were destroyed, fearful that the town’s location over a fault line will mean only more damage to come. Or they live on refuge sites or in their cars or backyards, transforming what remains of their lots into mini campsites with tents serving as alternates to the cracked homes in the foreground.



Sr. Judith Maldonado talks to Global Sisters Report about the Jan. 7 earthquake that struck Puerto Rico. She talks about surviving the quake, living in the aftermath, and how the disaster has impacted her. (GSR video / Soli Salgado, editing by Dana Wachter)

“The town feels empty, and that causes a lot of economic instability and loneliness for those who chose to stay,” Vázquez said, noting that many who owned stores have also chosen to flee. “Even those whose homes weren’t badly damaged, now they don’t have a grocery store or a pharmacy. They’re constantly wondering, what do I do? Should I leave?”

‘ANY TIME I FEEL A TREMBLE, MY HEART STARTS RACING’

Following Hurricane Maria and again after the earthquake, Centros Sor Isolina Ferré worked with committees of engineers and construction workers to help rebuild homes while Vázquez focused more on their immediate needs, calling agencies on the families’ behalf and finding out what services they qualify for or what donations they can receive.

They return to these people not just with items and information, but also with social workers and psychologists to help with the anxiety that strains those traumatized by the earthquake, fearful that their already-cracked home might cave with the slightest shake.

For years, Puerto Rico will experience aftershocks from the Jan. 7 earthquake, feeling smaller earthquakes on a daily basis for several more months, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Though none since have compared to the 6.4-magnitude that leveled homes and infrastructure throughout the southwest, Puerto Rico — which USGS notes “lies in a tectonically active region” — trembles anywhere from 20 to 30 times a day, according to Earthquake Track. (Most range close to a magnitude of 3, according to Puerto Rico Seismic Network.)

“A lot of times, the house is safe — engineers have told them it’s fine to keep living there — but still, people are too scared,” Vázquez said. “They’ll sleep outside their homes in tents or their cars because they’re afraid of what a tremble can do to their home while they’re sleeping.”



Even if a home appears not to be damaged superficially, structural engineers may find integral damage that make it dangerous to go inside. They designate a home either red or green to differentiate. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Home after home in this neighborhood in Guánica is designated red, meaning it's unsafe to enter. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Home after home in this neighborhood in Guánica is designated red, meaning it's unsafe to enter. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

The night of the earthquake, she said her house “felt like a ship rocking in the ocean.” The dining room was wet from the watercooler tumbling over, and the house was pitch-black since the lights had gone out.

“I slept in the living room for a long time after, fully dressed with a backpack by the door, ready to go in case we had to leave in a hurry,” she said. “The impacts afterward were very, very intense.”

Hurricanes come with warning; islanders are accustomed to taking such precautions with the notice they’re given, stocking up on essentials while moving further inland for safety. A ruinous earthquake, on the other hand, happens without notice.

“People are scared,” Vázquez said. “They don’t know whether there will be another big one when they feel the tremors. They’re afraid of the unknown. Those with kids are worried about keeping them safe, but also those who live with elderly because they wouldn’t be able to run out of the house if they had to. Their house could be authorized as safe, but if they’re that nervous and unsure, they’d prefer to sleep outside their homes.”

To ease their anxieties, Vázquez has an engineer check their home for reassurance, “but they still doubt.”

Wanda Rodríguez’s home in Guánica was still under repair following Hurricane Maria when the earthquake shook the two-story house in a remote part of the town. She’s lived in that house for 46 years, but she hasn’t gone back in since Jan. 7.

“For a while, I didn’t want to sleep anywhere near here. Any time I feel a tremble, my heart starts racing. ... That night [of the earthquake], it sounded like a literal monster, just incredibly loud and frightening. Every time I feel a tremble, it’s like I hear that monster again.”

Now, she and her husband, their son and their three young grandchildren sleep in a tiny wooden home right next to their old house, with an outdoor kitchen and a makeshift shower and

Civil engineer: We have to work with nature

Ponce, Puerto Rico — Cracked and caved-in homes all over the island may appear similarly destroyed, but the green or red X painted on the building is how one knows whether it's livable or on the brink of collapse.

Structural engineers analyze the conditions of the building and designate either green, which means a building is structurally sound even if it looks unsafe, or red, which means the building has been compromised and is possibly too weak to withstand even a minor tremor. In that case, it either needs further repair or ought to be demolished.

Armando Rodríguez Torres, a civil engineer, said informal construction throughout the island is the first to be destroyed in hurricanes or earthquakes, as people who built their own homes improvised the construction without meeting building codes.

That Puerto Rico was still recovering from Hurricane Maria, he said, means the earthquake struck when morale was already down.

"It's like we started a race already handicapped," said Rodríguez Torres, the director for the infrastructure and conservation department at the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico.

But even though he lives on an island that's susceptible to hurricanes and earthquakes, he said it's important to change the mindset that these are "natural disasters."

"It's a natural phenomenon; it's just nature," he said, noting that they serve a greater purpose in nature and that "we have to prepare to sustain them."

"It's us who have to work with it and not make a disaster of it."

- Soli Salgado

toilet. Depending on how long donations and construction take, they could live like this for several more months.

"There's no getting used to living like this," she said, adding that she most longs for a bathroom with privacy.

Finding people like Martínez and Rodríguez is what Juan Pablo Díaz Fortes does every day as president of the Volunteer Group for Disaster Relief of Puerto Rico. Once a local community leader pointed him in the direction of Wanda's house and family, he coordinated with people from various ministries — including Shalena Rodríguez of Centros Sor Isolina Ferré — to provide aid, such as building the tiny home where Wanda and her family now live.

Shalena Rodríguez said Wanda's situation right now is typical of many Puerto Ricans along the southern coast, expanding upon their new tiny houses on their land right by their old homes.

"I'm incredibly grateful for these people who



Armando Rodríguez Torres
(GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



As a member of the Centros Sor Isolina Ferré’s disaster relief team, Shalena Rodríguez works with local relief groups to provide Wanda and her family with supplies. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Wanda’s two-story house has been designated unlivable. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)



Below: The makeshift kitchen outside Wanda’s home (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

lent us a hand,” Wanda said. “We spent almost a month sleeping in my van before Juan Pablo came out here to offer help. ... Since it’s hard to reach our house, it was the first time we’ve ever been provided tanks of purified drinking water.”

Leaving Wanda’s home after dropping off supplies, Vázquez commented that the family was already living in humble conditions when the earthquake struck.

“Within their poverty came more poverty.”

THE STRUGGLES OF AN ECONOMIC CRISIS AFTER DISASTERS

“Even before [Hurricane] Maria, there were a lot of homeless,” said Fr. Enrique Camacho, executive director of Caritas of Puerto Rico, which is affiliated with Catholic Charities USA.

The island’s economic crisis “has been increasing with the natural disasters, and because we have a big debt in the government, there are a lot of social services that people are not receiving because there are no funds. All of that will lead to more homeless,” he said.

According to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, as of January 2019, Puerto Rico’s homeless population on any given day exceeded 2,500, though public school data through the Department of Education estimates that more than 6,700 students experienced homelessness at one point throughout the year.

“Ten years ago, those you saw on the streets were mostly drug addicts,” Camacho said. “Now, I can’t know who is a drug addict and who is not. But a lot aren’t.” (After the hurricane, the island also experienced a mass exodus: Pew Research reported a nearly 4% decline in the population.)

According to Camacho, following Hurricane Maria, Caritas coordinated a massive disaster response, partnering with Catholic Charities USA, which donated \$8 million, to feed around 700 people a day and with Home Depot, which donated \$250,000, to reconstruct homes. Through tears, Camacho recalled receiving \$100 from a group of kids in the United States who



Wanda and her son, Steven, stand outside the small room where the family has been sleeping, their makeshift kitchen in the background. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

sent a photo of their lemonade stand with the Puerto Rican flag.

Following hurricanes, more houses may be damaged, but repair is easier, Vázquez said. Houses made of concrete can withstand the winds and water, so the focus is typically on fixing roof damage and windows, as well as replacing belongings with water damage.

“But when the entire house has fallen, it’s not nearly as simple,” she said.

Hurricanes, however, tend to affect larger chunks of the island at a time, while earthquakes are more concentrated. It’s easier for Puerto Rico to band together and provide earthquake relief when just the southwest region needs help than to assist the entire island after a hurricane.

Dioceses throughout Puerto Rico, therefore, have been sending mattresses, water filters, solar lights, tents and other supplies to the Diocese of Ponce, Camacho said. Right after the earthquake, the drive from Ponce to Guánica — typically 25 minutes — could take two hours, “and not just because the roads were reduced to one lane, but

because there were a lot of people traveling and wanting to help,” he said.

“It’s an opportunity to remember we have to take care of our neighbors and be less individualistic.”



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St. Paul de Chartres Sister Léonard Huynh Thi An consoles Agnes Nguyen Thi Gai, who is bedridden and about 98, at the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang, central Vietnam. Gai has been abandoned by her relatives. (Joachim Pham)

In Vietnam's aging society, homeless women find shelter with nuns

Juen 1, 2020

by **Joachim Pham**

HUE, VIETNAM — In 2011 Martha Ho Thi Phan sold her only house for 350 million dong (about \$15,000) and offered it to her three sons who are married.

Phan, who is from Da Nang City in central Vietnam, gave 150 million dong (about \$6,400) to the eldest son and moved in to live with his family. By Vietnamese tradition, eldest sons take on the duty to look after their parents until their death.

The two other sons received the rest of the money. Phan's children do mostly manual jobs and earn low incomes.

Phan, who is now 84, had no problems with her eldest son's family until 2017, when she was hospitalized for her injured back after she slipped and landed flat on the floor.

Phan's daughter-in-law picked incessant quarrels with her husband over the burden of paying his mother's hospital fees. Finally, they abandoned her.

After she was discharged from the hospital, Phan lived with her other sons for only a short time because they could not afford to care for her due to their own financial and family problems.

They also refused to support her and accused the eldest son of taking money from their mother but not caring for her.

As a result, the mother of three had to live in



Homeless people of no fixed abode sleep in a public park in Ho Chi Minh City, where 100-200 vagrants and beggars are reportedly sent to state-run centers every month. (Joachim Pham)



Migrant families from other places live in leaf-covered shelters on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, which is reportedly home to an estimated 5 million domestic migrants. (Joachim Pham)



Le Thi Loc, whose house was collapsed by floods in Ha Tinh Province in 2016, sells candy and cookies to children in rural areas in Thua Thien Hue Province. The 46-year-old mother of two rents a bed to sleep in for 25,000-30,000 dong (\$1.07-1.29) per night. (Joachim Pham)



Daughter of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Anna Nguyen Thi Yen visits Tran Tau, who lives outside of an unoccupied house on the outskirts of Hue. Tau, 50, who is from Quang Nam Province, begs for food at local restaurants during the daytime. (Joachim Pham)

the street and at local markets.

Her tragic story is typical of elderly people who become victims of poverty and cultural change in the families caring for them.

St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Léonard Huynh Thi An, who works with elderly homeless people in Da Nang, said more and more of them are abandoned by their relatives. Family circumstances and crises, including breakdowns in relationships, domestic violence, abandonment and rifts over inheritance are major causes of homelessness.

An said the children scramble to inherit their property to support their own families and then ignore their parents.

The World Bank reported in 2018 that 9 million of its then 93 million people still lived in extreme poverty in Vietnam, where poor people were defined as those who earned up to 700,000 dong (\$31) a month in rural areas and 900,000 dong (\$40) in cities, according to VnExpress International.

An said many people have to sell their houses



Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception visit a house they built for a homeless family in Huong Tra Town of Thua Thien Hue Province. Since 2014, the nuns have built 35 houses for homeless people, including ethnic villagers. (Joachim Pham)



St. Paul de Chartres Sister Léonard Huynh Thi An, head of the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang, talks with two elderly women who became homeless after they were abandoned by their children. (Joachim Pham)



Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation sisters offers free acupuncture and medicine to poor patients, including homeless people at their convent in Hue City. (Joachim Pham)



Homeless women learn how to make clothes at a vocational skill workshop in Phu Vang District run by the Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception. (Joachim Pham)

or farmland to pay off debt or cover their medical treatment.

“Old people live alone because their children suffer mental problems, divorce and separate from their spouses. Others are deserted by their sons- or daughters-in-law after their own children’s death,” she said.

There is a growing trend for young people to live independently of their elderly parents, often seeking employment in urban areas. Consequently, many older people are forced to live alone and in poverty.

The General Office for Population and Family Planning at the Vietnam Ministry of Health reported 72% of older people live with their children and grandchildren, but the trend in family sizes is changing from larger, traditional families to small, nuclear families.

Vietnam is a rapidly aging society, with the proportion of people age 60 or older climbing to almost 12 percent in 2019, and expected to more than double that by 2050, according to Saigoneer. Almost 70% live in rural areas.

Many older people have no retirement pensions and have to depend on their children’s support. So when their children cannot support them, they end up living on the streets or in substandard housing.



Catharina Pham Thi Lien (second from left), 85, and other homeless women recite the rosary as they sit in their wheelchairs along the hallway. Prayer is one of their daily activities at the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang. (Joachim Pham)



Tran Thi Mong, a homeless woman, sleeps on the ground next to her bicycle loaded with used items in a hospital compound in Hue, central Vietnam. Mong, 49, left her husband, who drinks and who wounded her and set fire to their house. He was imprisoned for his acts of violence. (Joachim Pham)

HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE INVISIBLE

The Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs reported that in 2019 the country recorded 11.4 million elderly people. Of those, only 10,000 people were under care in centers for the homeless.

Beggars, vagrants, sex workers, orphans, people with mental illnesses and those who have no dwellings are forcibly sent to crowded centers run by the government.

Government authorities request that city residents not give money directly to beggars and homeless people so as to limit the number of homeless.

Although many elderly are newly adrift in the culture, the government's numbers of homeless are low.

The Population and Housing Census taken in April 2019 revealed that the Southeast Asian country with a population of over 96 million had only 4,418 persons – about 4.6 percent – without a home to live in. The homeless included 310 vagrants and 1,244 households floating or docked on waterways that the government does not define as housing.

Vo Thanh Sang, deputy director of the statistics office in Ho Chi Minh City, where only 39 households were purported to be homeless,

reportedly said those who lived in tents, camps or on the sidewalks were defined by the census as homeless family units, according to Tuoi Tre News. Those who resided under stairs, for example, but had partition walls and doors to separate their living space from their surroundings, were not considered homeless.

Some local newspapers reported that many people doubted the accuracy of the poll's findings since the astonishingly low number of homeless people seemed too good to be true. Real estate in the city is among the most expensive in Vietnam.

Nguyen Van Hung said he has become homeless in the city for 10 years after his mother died and his brother, a drug addict, sold their house.

Hung, 67, said he collects used items on the street for a living and sleeps on pavements and under bridges at night. "I live on food given by volunteers at midnight," he said.

"I regularly run away and hide myself in crowded streets to avoid being arrested by police," Hung said, looking around.

The latest national census also found that 7.7 million people lived in crowded houses, allowing below 8 square meters (86 square feet) per person.

Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs

Minister Dao Ngoc Dung told a meeting in Hanoi on Dec. 19, 2019, that social protection centers could not afford to receive the increasing number of older people who have no homes or suffer mental disorders. He said the government should offer private individuals aid to provide housing and care for homeless elders.



Sr. Marie Tran Thi Ha takes Anna Tran Thi Bon to the chapel at the home. (Joachim Pham)

NUNS CARE FOR HOMELESS WOMEN

An, who runs the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang, said local authorities send all homeless people and vagrants to government-run centers, which are very crowded. They have no housing options.

Established in 1996, the home offers free accommodation and care to 30 women, ages 70-100. The women are from Da Nang and the neighboring province of Quang Nam.

Sisters from parishes, who know older women's circumstances, send them to the home. Local authorities also refer elderly women without relatives to the nuns.

The home is served by six nuns and 20 volunteers who are students. Under the current pandemic, the home has kept pace with its mission because the residents do not go off the property and maintain a low risk of exposure, An says.

Phan said she gained admittance into the home in 2018 after the nuns found her homeless. "I found my home here and I decided to embrace

Catholicism last December," she said.

Mary Nguyen Thi Hai, dressed in brown clothes, every day uses a walker to move around the yard in front of the home.



Mary Nguyen Thi Hai, 81, takes in the fresh air after she walks around the yard of the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang. Hai became homeless in 2014 after her daughter sold her house and moved away because she could not repay her debt to local loan sharks. (Joachim Pham)

"I am happy here. The nuns and volunteers serve me good food, help me do personal hygiene and other things, and treat my high blood pressure and disorders of vestibular function," the woman from Quang Nam Province said.

Her grandson sent her to the home in 2014 after her daughter sold her house and moved away to find work because she could not repay her debt to local loan sharks.

"This is my home and they [nuns and volunteers] are my real relatives because my own relatives have abandoned me," the 81-year-old woman said.

A volunteer raises and puts 85-year-old Maria Nguyen Thi Can into a wheelchair, then pushes the chair to the toilet, washing and changing Can's clothes before lunch.

Can, who is thin and weak, said she lived alone in a ramshackle shelter and collected used items from garbage for a living after her son died in a road accident in 2006.

In 2014, a neighbor found her sick and took her to a local hospital where a St. Paul de Chartres sister looked after her.



Teresa Hoang Thi Kim Dung, a volunteer, helps an elderly woman move around as she exercises at the center. Some 20 students volunteer to serve older women at the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang. (Joachim Pham)

“After my recovery, the nuns got government permits and admitted me into their home,” Can said.

“I have everything here. My life changes as I am treated with deep respect and love here,” she said, adding that she has good friends to talk with.

Can, who received Catholicism in 2016, said she attends daily Mass and recites the rosary and Divine Mercy.

“Most of the elderly women feel real peace, love, charity, sisterhood and dignity and consequently follow Catholic faith after their admittance to the home,” An said.

Sr. Marie Tran Thi Ha said the women each have a bed and wardrobe. Those who cannot walk share the same hall so that the nuns and volunteers can serve them easier.

She said they have four meals a day, do exercises, walk around the home and pray together. Those who are too weak are fed by hand. Those who suffer serious diseases are hospitalized and the nuns look after them there.

“We tell them funny and nice stories before their bedtime so that they can regain positive feelings in life,” Ha said.

They are given flowers and gifts on their

birthdays and feast days. They also celebrate death anniversaries of people they knew.

Ha said the nuns keep in contact with the women’s relatives and ask them to pay visits to those who are dying and, later, attend their funerals. The home has a 5,000-square-meter cemetery to bury the dead.

An said the home survives on donations from the Mother House of Da Nang Province of St. Paul de Chartres Sisters and local benefactors, who provide rice, clothes, medicine, money and wheelchairs. The province has 500 members.

Volunteers plant vegetables and raise poultry at the home’s garden to serve the women.

“All what we do aims at saying that all people deserve proper housing, being loved and treated fairly,” An said.

JOACHIM PHAM is a GSR correspondent from Vietnam.

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Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, left, a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation, speaks to Chandra, a migrant woman from Telangana state who now lives in Saligao, a village in Goa. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Migrant workers flood Goa beaches for jobs; sisters help them fit in

July 9, 2020

by Lissy Maruthanakuzhy

Editor's note: This story was reported before the COVID-19 lockdown in India, and an estimated three-fourths of migrant workers in Goa have left the state. Since the government's loosening of the lockdown three weeks ago, the sisters have been checking in on the remaining migrant workers, urging them to develop new small-scale trades, such as selling fish, footwear or homemade items on the roadside. Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, the sister featured in the story as a lead advocate for the migrants, says they are working with the labor commission to help in this transition, and that the workers are receiving food kits from local sources and are "living rather comfortably."

PANAJI, INDIA — Sr. Marie Lou Barboza was shocked to see the condition of a teenage girl one of her volunteers brought to her. The girl had burn marks on her body, and her unkempt hair was cut haphazardly. She would become hysterical when someone approached her. Barboza discovered that her condition was the result of maltreatment by her employer.

"That incident compelled us to begin our work among migrants," the member of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary told Global Sisters Report earlier this year in an interview at the congregation's apartment in Porvorim, just north of Panaji, in Goa state.

That incident was seven years ago when Barboza was working for the National Domestic



An elderly migrant woman manages a stall where she sells vegetables in Fontainhas, Panaji, capital of Goa, a western Indian state. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Workers' Movement in the west coast Indian state, the country's tourism hub that draws thousands of laborers from other regions.

Barboza's congregation, a partner of the workers movement, sent two sisters to Goa in 2011 to aid domestic workers. Barboza joined them two years later after working with the movement in Mumbai, India's commercial capital, and Tamil Nadu, a southern Indian state.

After meeting the mistreated girl, Barboza began visiting parishes and homes of migrant domestic workers in Goa. She went by herself to visit the slums, as her two elderly companions could not travel.

Later, two young nuns joined Barboza to work exclusively with about 1,600 migrants, mostly tribal women of various religions from states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Odisha and Telangana. The nuns' three-bedroom apartment has become the meeting place for the migrants, who work in different parts of Goa, a small state.

While migrant women work as domestic help and serve in restaurants, shops and roadside kiosks, the men build houses and roads or work as waiters and bakers.

Barboza, who is 67, says many migrants

refuse to join the workers movement because of threats from employers, who dislike the job demands the activists are seeking.

"We send notices to employers if they pay unjust wages," Barboza said as she took GSR to a slum of migrant workers in Saligao, 3.5 miles from the nuns' residence.

The nun said the migrants want to maintain their self-respect. "They are not pleased if we take photographs" of them and their families.

A 12-HOUR DAY FOR THE SISTER

The nun's weekday routine begins at 6 a.m. when she sets out with her lunchbox to visit families in the slums to help them get food and medical aid. She returns to the convent at 6 p.m., exhausted.

"My heart goes out for the migrants. They struggle for their living. They are also forced to find new places to stay every two years," she said as we moved from one family to another. Employers keep migrants on the move, fearing that, after two years, they can claim permanent residency on their property. In addition, when new tenants come, landlords can raise the room rents.

Sunday is the busiest day for the nuns because a string of workers come with their families to chitchat with the sisters and sometimes stay



Migrant men repair a road in Mala, a village in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)



Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, lower right, touches base with a migrant woman at her home after work in Saligao, a village in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)



A cluster of tenements where migrant workers live in Saligao village in Goa (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

for a meal. “That is our life. We have committed to serve the poor, the migrants, the domestic servants, daily laborers,” Barboza explained.

Barboza got a call one night from another teenage girl, complaining about her employer trying to molest her when his wife was away to have her baby. “I called the man and asked him to bring the girl to our residence at once. He brought her and apologized for his misbehavior. He requested me to send the girl back to work for him, but I refused.”

But her decision brought another problem for the sisters, whose quarters are limited. She had to find a place for the girl to stay at night. “There are times when we have to provide accommodation and food to such people.”

Besides attending to such problems, the nuns visit the migrants’ houses, focus on the faith formation of the Catholics among them, and create awareness about their rights.

PUSHBACK FROM EMPLOYERS AND LOCALS

Barboza says her involvement with the migrant workers was challenging in the beginning. “It was tough to get acceptance of our mission by the employers.”

Her troubles were not limited to employers



A migrant woman selling waste papers collected from shops stops to converse with another woman in the city center of Panaji, in Goa, western India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

alone. Even local people and government officers ridiculed her for spending time on behalf of the migrants. They warned that the migrants would bring more like them to Goa and create problems for locals.

“They told me to find locals as domestic workers and help them first. Then look after the migrants. I took the challenge and found many local domestic workers. The government officials were willing to help them, but the local maids were not enough to meet the demand,” she said.

She says even their parish priest could not understand their involvement with the migrants, until she took the girl who had burn marks to him so that he could pray over her to dispel her fear.

“The priest recognized the necessity of our work. Since then he and other priests have been very cooperative,” Barboza explained.

One of her hurdles was to get “ration cards” for migrant workers. The cards enable people to procure subsidized food grains, oil and other domestic provisions from the government’s public distribution system.

The nun helped both the local people and the migrants to acquire ration cards.

Barboza says they also have to handle arrest criminal cases involving migrants. A few of them were jailed for robberies. “We had two such cases. The police called us to bail them out with our identity card of the National Domestic Workers’ Movement.”

Because some migrants have resorted to theft, she says, the sisters require them to show proper documents when they come seeking help.

The nuns also have assisted the migrants with burying their dead.

DIGNITY AND DAYS OFF

Sr. Raichel Sophia Benny, who joined the Goa community three years ago, says their work with the migrant domestic workers through empowerment programs has brought results.

Benny said the domestic workers now acknowledge that their work is as good as any job



Sr. Marie Lou Barboza, right, a member of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Panaji, capital of the western Indian state of Goa, assists migrant workers in the tourist region to acclimate. From left are Immaculate Heart Srs. Raichel Sophia Benny and Sr. Sushmita Barla. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

and have found dignity in it. “Earlier they were ashamed to acknowledge their work,” she told GSR.

She says while some full-timers live with their employers, others have to stay in rented houses.

Chandra (who goes by one name), a mother of two from Telangana, said the nuns’ intervention has helped them get days off on Sundays and public holidays.

Her house in Saligao is a one-room tenement among a cluster of homes. She shares a kitchen with two other families. Her family uses one room for eating, sleeping and for the children to study. Every house has several vessels kept outside in front with water to use all day for cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and bathing.

Some 50 families share two bathrooms and two water supply taps.

Benny wants the government to help the workers get cheap accommodations. “By the time they are 50, the migrants become sick because of heavy workloads,” she said.

The employers force the workers to do all chores manually, she says, even though they



Janvi Toppo, a migrant woman, serves evening customers at her fast food kiosk in Panaji in the west coast state of Goa, India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

have machines for washing, grinding rice and spices for cooking, and cleaning. Some women work for five families to earn enough to survive, the nun explains.

Several of the workers acknowledge the sisters for their assistance.

“The sisters have helped us understand about the social securities and privileges available to people like us. They help us to fill out the necessary forms to apply for the necessary documents,” said Kiren Kerketta, a woman from Jharkhand in eastern India who is a domestic worker at Calangute, a popular beach area on the Arabian Sea coast lined with bars and restaurants.

Kerketta was excited to say that her only son has entered the Society of Pilar, a Goa-based congregation, to become a priest. “I am very happy God has chosen him. And I feel privileged to give my only son for God’s work,” she told GSR.

She said the nuns have taught her to save from her meager income so that the family can

contribute some money for the son’s priestly formation.

The nuns also organize Mass and retreats for migrants to help them spiritually, and encourage the tribal people to hold their annual harvest festival Karam. “It is an occasion for them to share about themselves and their concerns,” Barboza said.

GIVING BACK

Barboza also gets help from the migrants to fulfill her mission.

Pancretia Toppo from Chhattisgarh, who lives in Calangute, was the first leader Barboza appointed to manage and inspire a migrant group. “I contacted our people, visiting their houses for 13 years,” said Toppo, who came to Goa some 20 years ago.

She works in Miramar about 8 miles south of Calangute. “I have to change buses and board a ferry to reach the workplace,” she said.

Toppo says their Sunday gatherings at

the church after Eucharist help them support each other and share information about job opportunities. “We live far away from our dear ones, but the sisters boost our morale,” the mother of two teenage daughters said. Her employer, a German, has helped educate her children.

Barboza says the migrants come to them when they face difficulties in the workplace or at home. “We spend time with them. Sometimes they come hungry and we provide them meals from what we have.”

Fr. Maverick Fernandes, director of Caritas Goa, the archdiocesan social service wing, hails the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters for organizing the local and migrant domestic workers so well.

“Their gatherings help them to network with each other amongst themselves. They are able to voice out issues that crop up at the workplace. Celebration of festivals enables them to maintain their sociocultural traditions. Thus they do not feel alienated from their tribes,” the priest told GSR.

Barboza says they forget their personal tensions and difficulties when they reach out to the migrants.

“Only with faith in the Lord who has called us can we go forward,” she said as she hurried to the bus stand, clutching her lunch bag to go home after the day’s work.



LISSY MARUTHANAKUZH *is a member of the worldwide Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul in India and a correspondent for Matters India, a news portal that focuses on religious and social issues.*



Staff help residents of the Francis Heights senior community in Denver, Colorado, sign up for Alexa Echo Dots (smart speakers) as part of an effort that began before the pandemic to reduce social isolation. (Courtesy of Mercy Housing)

Residents' needs are the 'North Star' of Mercy Housing

SISTERS' AGENCY IS LARGEST US NONPROFIT PROVIDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Aug 6, 2020

by **Dan Stockman**

Eileen Carnes wasn't sure she wanted to move from the apartment she had lived in for 32 years to a senior community 20 miles further west into the Chicago suburbs.

"My son found this for me. He said, 'Mom, this is the perfect place for you,' " Carnes said. "I told him I'd miss my friends, but he said, 'You'll still have those friends, and you'll make new ones.' He was right."

Today, Carnes, 88, knows almost every resident of Colony Park in Carol Stream, Illinois — and that's the point. Colony Park, and all of the

properties run by Mercy Housing Inc., are about building community, not just real estate.

"I can go among my own family and it's like I'm not even in the room sometimes. They're all deep into what's going on in their worlds," Carnes said. "But here, they make you feel like you're the most important person there is."

Mercy Housing, a sponsored ministry of eight U.S. congregations of women religious, is the largest nonprofit affordable housing agency in the country and the fourth-largest provider of affordable housing, according to Affordable Housing Finance magazine. It has more than 23,000 units of affordable housing and is home to nearly 50,000 residents across 41 states. But

that is a drop in a sea of need.

An estimated 11.4 million households in the United States do not earn enough to afford housing, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Those 11.4 million households are competing for just 4 million units that are affordable and available, the coalition reports.

And even those numbers may be paltry: Experts say the millions of people that the coronavirus pandemic has thrown out of work could lead to 28 million evictions of people who cannot pay their rent. By Aug. 1, the New York Times reported, 29 states were to be without bans on evictions, and the next few months could bring a tidal wave of people thrown into the street. The four-month eviction ban that covered rental housing backed by the federal government, about one-third of rental households, expired July 24.

“Housing is a human right. Food security is a human right. Water is a human right. Health care is a human right,” said Sr. Linda Werthman, who chairs the board of Mercy Housing and is a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. “I heard someone say this pandemic may give us a ... chance to get right what we provide as a country. But from our communal experience as women religious, we understand that it’s what you give instead of how much you can amass that matters.”

THE BIG PICTURE BEYOND HOUSING

Those who can’t afford unsubsidized rent usually have other needs, as well, such as educational challenges, a lack of transportation, living in food deserts or a lack of affordable and accessible health care — all of which compound each other. But Mercy Housing has never been about just housing.

The original goal of Mercy Housing “wasn’t to build more and more affordable housing. It was to meet the needs of people who needed affordable housing but had other needs, as well,” Werthman said. While the Mercy Sisters of



Mercy Sr. Mary Terese Tracy, the first CEO of Mercy Housing, right, in a 1980 meeting proposing a response to the affordable housing shortage in the United States (Courtesy of Mercy Housing)

the early 1980s were heavily invested in health care, they knew housing was tied to many other factors, such as health and education.

“Those women knew nothing about housing except that there was a need,” Werthman said. “But they knew what they didn’t know, and they brought in experts to handle those things.”

The agency began in 1981, when Sr. Timothy Marie O’Roark, a Sister of Mercy of Omaha, Nebraska, and a legal aid attorney, saw the conditions in which her clients lived in Omaha. O’Roark asked the congregation to make affordable housing one of its sponsored ministries. At the community’s next chapter, her sisters agreed.

“With an initial investment of \$500,000, the sisters made it clear that their goal with this ministry is to provide opportunities for residents to stabilize their lives and achieve their dreams,” a history of the agency says on its website. “They envisioned affordable housing coupled with supportive services as a means to achieve this goal.”

Mercy Housing began as a housing management agency, but a real estate professional on its first board of directors said the sisters needed to own the properties, not just run them, so they would have control and be able

to leverage their capital to expand.

By 1983, they had created both a management subsidiary and a financing arm. The agency grew over the decades from an initial 310 units in Omaha to nearly 50,000 residents and 1,600 employees today, serving low-income people, seniors and those with special needs. All three types of community are aimed at meeting residents' many needs, not just their need for a place to live.



Anita, the first resident of Mercy Housing's Mercy Terrace in San Francisco, on moving day in the late 1980s. (Courtesy of Mercy Housing)

KEEPING FOCUS IN A PANDEMIC

The agency “was always about impacting lives in a meaningful way,” said Jane Graf, who spent 33 years with Mercy Housing, including six years as president and CEO, before retiring June 30. “It’s never been that it hasn’t been our focus, but we recognized the need to put it front and center and make a bold statement about how we’re going to get there.”

Leadership wanted a strategic plan for 2020 to 2024 that would inspire residents, employees and the organization’s many stakeholders, so

they spent 2018 engaging with employees and residents, gauging how actions today can affect the future, and they spent 2019 creating the plan. They hired the Bridgespan Group, which advises nonprofits on social impact, to help them learn through interviews and focus groups what the real — not perceived — needs were. They found that residents want to be part of the decision-making process, not just told what their problems are.

The result, officials say, is a new focus on residents that makes their needs the heart of everything the organization does. That focus has become more important with the coronavirus pandemic, which worsened just as Mercy Housing was rolling out the plan.

Having achieved the goals of scaling up and securing financial stability, Graf said, they now can put new energy into making residents’ needs the basis of everything they do.

Chief Operating Officer Michele Stowe said the resident focus means a Mercy staffer at every property calls senior residents every day to help fight social isolation. Printed materials on how to practice social distancing had to be translated into 12 different languages.

Those needs existed before the pandemic, Stowe said. But the lockdowns and quarantines and closures laid them bare and made them even more critical.

“This pandemic puts it front and center,” she said.

Graf agreed.

“Things like social isolation in our senior population: That’s a huge mental and physical health problem that is just exacerbated by shelter-in-place orders,” she said. “This summer, how do we get kids some kind of school curriculum? What are they going to do in a family where nobody’s home because the parents are essential workers? It’s just really scary.”

The agency used grants and donations to provide more than 1,000 laptops to students in need at various locations, but officials then had

to make sure they had internet access.

“You or I can call our internet provider and pay an extra \$20 a month for a while so the kids can do online school,” Stowe said. “But you can’t ask that of a family that’s already struggling and then had a drop in income or a total loss of income.”

Many residents already struggled to get nutritious food, but now, riding a crowded city bus to the store could be a life-or-death proposition for some. So officials work with food pantries, find volunteers to box up and deliver food, and coordinate food drives to bring food to Mercy properties.

The new resident focus envisioned community meetings and interaction between residents and between residents and Mercy staff — all of which had to be curtailed or stopped outright.

“For the foreseeable future, we’re not going to be able to bring together groups of people,” Stowe said. “So what are some different models we can use?”

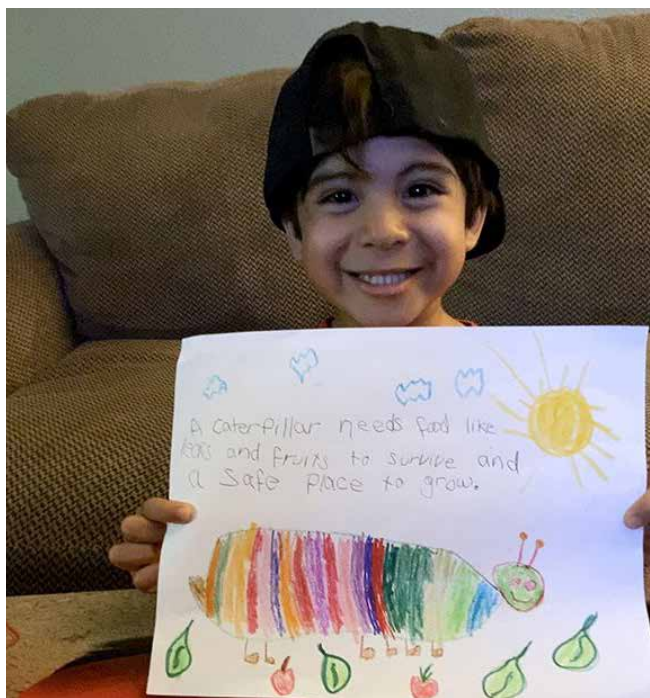
The residents of Mercy Housing communities seem to have found an answer. There have been socially distant gardening and donations between neighbors of books, puzzles and healthy snacks, among other activities.

“Neighbors are getting to know each other better. They’re not commuting an hour and a half to work and coming home exhausted and just want to shut the door,” she said. “We’re seeing communities come together safely in ways that are really lovely.”

‘THEY REALLY SPOIL US’

Werthman said O’Roark’s simple declaration about the conditions her clients lived in — “We can do better” — is still the driving force for Mercy Housing’s employees.

“[The agency] is huge, but I have to say, even before the pandemic, the key is that idea of residents being our North Star,” Werthman said. “How do we listen to our residents and hear their



A resident at one of Mercy Housing’s communities in California shows off the artwork he made as part of Camp Mercy, a four-week interactive, virtual summer program that began July 7 for students in first through 10th grades. More than 300 students at 40 communities registered for the project-based learning program designed to keep them from falling behind academically during the coronavirus pandemic. (Courtesy of Mercy Housing)

needs and then meet them? ... We pride ourselves on resident services, but we needed to come back full circle to why Mercy Housing was started.”

Colony Park resident Carnes said the immaculate grounds and buildings and the care the staff has taken to keep residents safe during the pandemic are all wonderful, but the community is what really sets the complex apart.

When Carnes first moved in almost five years ago, the community was owned by the Wheaton Franciscans; in 2017, the order transferred 33 complexes to Mercy Housing as they let go of corporate ministries. Carnes said things were great with the Franciscans and even better with the Mercy Sisters.

“They send us puzzles. There’s always something on the door — a bag of food or a letter with news of what’s happening. They really spoil



Music fills the air at Colony Park in Carol Stream, Illinois, where senior residents participated in a song-and-dance event from the safety of their balconies while staff sang and danced to a karaoke machine below. (Courtesy of Mercy Housing)

us,” she said. “Everybody is so kind. They worry about us. It’s so caring.”

Her neighbor Bessie Bray, 76, said you can’t fake caring and appreciation.

“The people in the office are genuine,” Bray said. “They’re working on stuff for us all the time.”

Maintaining community is difficult when people can’t be together for fear of spreading COVID-19, so Colony Park staff members initiated events such as Music Mondays, when they stand outside each building with a karaoke machine and sing and dance to the residents, who join in on upbeat songs like the Village People’s “YMCA” from their balconies.

“I yelled, ‘You know, you need to practice,’ “ Bray said. “One of ‘em yelled back, ‘Come down

and join us.’ “

The pandemic precautions are especially appreciated, Bray said, because less than 3 miles away, a senior complex had 116 cases of COVID-19 and 20 deaths. Colony Park had one case and no deaths.

“I don’t think I could live anywhere else,” she said. “I have a friend that lives downtown, and I tell her, ‘I did this’ and ‘we did that,’ and she says, ‘We don’t have that.’ “



DAN STOCKMAN is national correspondent for *Global Sisters Report*. His email address is dstockman@ncronline.org.



Lupe is pictured in housing converted from a pigsty, where she is living with her 3-year-old boy and her partner, in the community of Villa García, Zacatecas, Mexico. After being chased out by her in-laws, she went home with her partner, only to discover there was no room for them in the house. An uncle who raises pigs behind their house converted a pigsty into housing for them. (Frances Smith)

COLUMN: Insecure and inadequate housing in Zacatecas

Aug 26, 2020

by Frances Smith

When I was president of the nonprofit Neighbor Helping Neighbor in Parkersburg, West Virginia, we had the Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, help to build and later repair houses. Here in the community of Villa García, Zacatecas, Mexico, there is little or no government help at present. Yet many live with poor housing conditions, or are robbed of the little they have.

Over the years here, I have been so sad for the families who have had titles to their land, but then — by some crooked means or legal detail someone has employed — they find out a relative or neighbor now has papers for their land. One such family lives in the hills of a remote area.

Isabel, widow and mother of eight, lost her husband at age 40 to an unknown cause. She has two children with muscular dystrophy. One of her husband's relatives wants the land where she lives. She has had to stop raising chickens and other farm animals that gave the family sustenance. Now, all she has is the actual house, and she is not sure that it will remain hers, even though she has the title to it. No one knows how this story will end.

Chuy cared for his father for years. His father lived across the road from him and told Chuy the land would be his when he passed on. After his dad died, another family member worked with their son, a lawyer, to get title to the land. Chuy then had no access to the well that was a part of the land, and many hard feelings arose. Orally ceding property is not secure, and causes families

to quarrel and fight many legal battles.

Reynaldo lent his property title to his brother, for what seemed like an innocent request. His brother found someone who helped him change the document so that the land was now his. Reynaldo subsequently became very ill, as it was very hard for him to forgive what his brother had done.

Since this is a semi-desert area, it seldom rains. When it does, many homes have problems with roof leaks, damp walls and crumbling structures. One day I was visiting a family in a rural community, when Rafa mentioned that his kitchen had fallen down. On my next visit I found out that another room had fallen, and that an attached room also had to be torn down. With donations we were able to begin building rooms for the family.



Pictured in the photo is the single room for the five children of one family — three girls, ages 16, 13 and 11, and two boys, ages 9 and 8. Donations are helping the author and others to help the parents build a room to separate the girls from the boys.
(Frances Smith)



Rafa's home, in Villa García, Zacatecas, Mexico, contains a room that had to be removed. It was attached to the kitchen and another room that fell down. It was being used for one of the adult men in the family, and snakes were living in the ceiling.
(Frances Smith)

Another family told me they badly needed a room to separate the girls from the boys. The three oldest are girls, ages 16, 13 and 11, the boys 9 and 8. All were crowded into one room, with the parents sleeping next to them, only a partial wall dividing them. With donations we also began helping them to build a room.

These are only two examples of families that are affected by low wages and the weather. Since we began helping these two families, other families from this community have come looking for help. In this community, there were 14 families that paid a former local government worker to begin constructing needed rooms. After paying the woman, they discovered it was a fraud. Because of the coronavirus, home visits are restricted, but we will try to continue to visit these families in the future.

Families that rent generally have very little income. One family had a plot of land where there was no electricity or water, but with a job fixing bicycles that paid better than the factory wages, they built a room in which they have a bunk bed. The boy and girl sleep on top, and the parents sleep in the bunk below. The day we visited them it had rained, and we found the floor flooded.

They had no way to finish it, but we helped them with bricks and cement. This family was jubilant to have their own space and not pay rent. The village took them water, which they kept in containers outside the house. Eventually electricity was supplied as another family also built in the area. Their dream is to build another room, and they've begun collecting materials to



Two parents stand in the room that they built on a plot of land that they own in Villa García, Zacatecas, Mexico. They have a bunk bed in the room; their children, ages 14 and 11, sleep on the top bunk, while the parents sleep on the bottom. Despite having to deal with flooding, the family is glad to have their own space and not pay rent. (Frances Smith)

do so.

Couples often begin their life together with one of their families. When I met Lupe, she told me her in-laws had chased them out, so she went home with her partner, only to find out there was no room for them in that house. Consequently, one of the uncles who raises pigs behind the house agreed to convert a pigsty into housing for Lupe, her 3-year-old boy and her partner. Her father gave her a small plot of land on which to build, but their income isn't enough to do so.

There is no end to the needs due to poverty. These are mostly people who value work and find creative ways to augment their income. Some go into the hills and gather good dirt for plants; in season, they gather and prepare the edible pads of the nopal cactus, honey, the fruit of the bisnaga, another form of cactus, and the fruit of prickly pear cacti. Many also recycle plastic and other materials.

We have helped fix houses and repair roofs

for the elderly and others, helped find roofing for homes, helped with beds, stoves, refrigerators and hot plates, sometimes used, sometimes new. There are many we have been able to help in these small ways, but there are few we can help with an entire room. We are grateful for the donations that come in, as our goal is helping the poor live with more dignity. Since I belong to the Sisters For Christian Community, we don't have resources in common, but I have received donations from some of our sisters. Other donations come from family or acquaintances who recognize that this is a shared ministry of love.



SR. FRANCES E. SMITH is a member of the Sisters for Christian Community. She has ministered in Villa García, Zacatecas, Mexico, for the last 22 years.

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Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna Sr. Judy Padasas, left, meets with families who live under an overpass in Delhi called Moti Bagh. In an attempt by the government to beautify the city, these people face being removed from their spot. (Alina Tiphagne)

COLUMN: UNANIMA International members adapt homelessness solutions during COVID-19

Sep 1, 2020

by Jean Quinn

UNANIMA International is a coalition of 22 different congregations of sisters and friends who advocate at the United Nations. A vital part of our mission is to ensure that the voice and the journey of those who have experienced homelessness continues to be heard. To date, our research on family homelessness, displacement and trauma has enabled us to bring the lived experiences of people — especially women and children who have no home — to be heard directly by decision makers, to give them a place at the table.

Here we are months later, collectively

experiencing and witnessing a time of great upheaval, where those most vulnerable — as always — will suffer the most. United by our shared belief in social justice, we will emerge from this time even more unified and devoted to the task of eliminating homelessness. One thing that remains striking to me in this time of hardship is that people all over the world are rising to the occasion and giving their best efforts especially to the homeless and marginalized.

The member communities of UNANIMA International have been sharing with us their work on the ground during the pandemic. Each in their own way, many of our sisters and their ministries are contributing greatly to helping vulnerable individuals and families, including



UNANIMA International's board of directors includes one sister representative from each of the 22 congregations represented. (Provided photo)

people experiencing homelessness.

In Litchfield, Connecticut, Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Centre closed due to COVID-19. It is known for its delicious and healthy meals, and the sisters have since heard the call for help; they have been preparing nightly meals for a local homeless shelter. Other sisters throughout the USA are transferring their government “pandemic pension” checks to the local food bank programs and to the assistance of local families who need rent money. During Holy Week, sisters in India started an outreach food/education program combined with prayers. This project is primarily incorporated into their mobile outreach.

One of our Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna communities in Tagaytay in the Philippines, like many, is quarantined due to the virus. This particular community has a program for the tribal children. They are trying to stay focused on some of the good things, for the sake of the children. Sister Liza writes:

There are also positive things happening because of community quarantine ... nature is happy. After the eruption, nature now is resting, peaceful and back to its normal beauty. The volcano also is peaceful. We can always see the moon and the stars at night.

The sad thing is that there are lots of people suffering because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Many are hungry, especially the poor, and many have lost their lives. Before, also, there were lots of natural calamities happening in our country that also caused death because of not taking care of our nature. People abuse it by creating things that destroy nature. Now, no more air pollution!

We have also seen many of our communities focus their ministries on providing for both documented and displaced migrants. Caritas has been working for refugees and migrants since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, distributing food and hygiene kits through its PARI (Point d'Accueil pour les Réfugiés et Immigrés, a reception desk for refugees and immigrants) sector. There Marist Sr. Josephine Gueye has been in charge of carrying out various actions to relieve refugees. As a social worker ministering in PARI, Sister Josephine is responsible for identifying the most vulnerable families (while being aware that not all families' needs can be satisfied). Every day, she receives phone calls for help from refugee families who lack the basic necessities. Faced with this situation, she listens, discerns and acts to solve the problem.

In the colonial space of Ceuta, Spain, sisters are attending to the migrant populations that continue crossing into the Iberian Peninsula. They are also educating and caring for the wider population hit so hard with the virus. This video clip of the arrival of a group of migrants who had crossed the barbed wire barriers is a Spanish narrative, but the images speak for themselves.

Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Sara Proctor, a certified physician assistant, runs free medical clinics in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida, for the uninsured. Typically, patients are migrants and seasonal workers, but now they have come to include people from Catholic Charities' new homeless tent project. Sister Sara and her staff have improvised to see patients outside. Thanks to great innovative minds, medical care continues during this time of crisis for the medically underserved of the St. Petersburg Diocese.

Around the world, members of UNANIMA International have taken to delivering pastoral care, materials and support via online platforms. While this is a new approach for many, they continue to tend to the needs of their community in a meaningful manner. Like many others, a community of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart in the United Kingdom are keeping in touch with their parishioners on behalf of their parish priest and livestreaming different prayers on a daily basis and outreach letters via email. Their retreat houses in Philadelphia are also adopting livestreaming as a means of communication.

In three languages, the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna's international communications team has invited us and all our various realities, with a virtual communication and reflection, to create a connection with them.

As a collective, UNANIMA International has initiated a call to action around the recognition and support of people experiencing family homelessness and housing insecurity at the international level. We have released a statement on COVID-19 and family homelessness in seven languages (English here) as well as organized social media events, such as Twitter storms,



In India the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna started an outreach food and education program. This project is primarily incorporated into their mobile outreach...and combined with Holy Week prayers. (Maureen Foltz)

to gain traction on the issue and promote education and advocacy in grassroots spaces and international and domestic political spaces.

As its director, on behalf of UNANIMA International, I would like to give recognition to the wonderful sisters and all people who continue to work at the frontlines in battling this virus. We would also like to give a special commendation to all of our sisters who have been taken by the virus, thanking them for their lifetime of service. We send our prayers to all those who continue to suffer from the direct and indirect effects of it.



JEAN QUINN is a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom. She is currently the executive director of UNANIMA International, a coalition of 22 groups of women religious working at the United Nations. She continues her work with the homeless as the co-chair of the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness.



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, one of the co-founders of Project HOME in Philadelphia, meets clients at a Project HOME medical facility in December. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

'A woman of faith, action and energy': Sr. Mary Scullion of Project HOME

MERCY SISTER AND HER ORGANIZATION KEEP UP THE FIGHT TO END HOMELESSNESS IN PHILLY

Sept 7, 2020

by Chris Herlinger

PHILADELPHIA — On a recent late summer afternoon, Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion found herself, as she has so often in the last six months, at home and working on Zoom.

Wearing a green Irish-themed Philadelphia Phillies T-shirt, the nationally recognized advocate for those who are homeless expressed frustration with pandemic-driven realities, rules and challenges that seem almost normal now but would have been unthinkable six months ago.

"It's been a very, very stressful, challenging, creative time," said Scullion, who heads

Philadelphia's Project HOME, one of the most prominent anti-homelessness organizations in the United States. "It's just very hard to describe. There's just been a sea of changes in so many ways."

The pandemic has brought many challenges, but her colleagues and advocates in the trenches on the issue of homelessness say Scullion is indefatigable and has the political savvy to turn a setback into a win.

Certainly, the results speak for themselves: What began as a city emergency shelter more than 30 years ago has grown into a respected organization in Philadelphia that operates 900 housing units and runs job and educational

projects as well as a neighborhood wellness and health center.

The integration of programs pays off. When Scullion was named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2009, the publication noted, "More than 95% of those who cycle through [Project HOME] ... have never again returned to life on the streets — a success rate that has made the program a model for dozens of other U.S. cities."

Even with the recognition and success, friends and allies of Scullion say that little about her has changed through the years.

"The passion and commitment are all there, and they were there at the beginning," said Eva Gladstein, the deputy managing director for Health and Human Services for the City of Philadelphia. Gladstein has known Scullion since the 1980s, when both worked as housing advocates.

That passion, Gladstein said in a recent interview with Global Sisters Report, is now supplemented by years of experience and the ability to adapt to different circumstances.

Scullion made it clear in a Zoom interview with GSR that while there may be opportunities now to explore new ways of doing things, the COVID-19 pandemic is worsening an already-difficult situation in Philadelphia.



From left: Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, Henry Nicholas and Bob Brand at a 1989 demonstration on homeless issues at Philadelphia City Council (Courtesy of Project HOME/Harvey Finkle)

Philadelphia has witnessed a 10% annual rise in housing costs in recent years, making housing less affordable to those with lower incomes, Scullion said. Luckily, in the wake of the pandemic, the city's housing authority has extended an eviction moratorium until March 2021. But the overall pandemic situation remains troubling, Scullion said.

"We're seeing the devastation of homelessness coupled now with COVID," Scullion said. "That complicates homelessness and COVID to some extent in very serious ways, because obviously when people are told to stay at home but they don't have a home to go to, that makes social distancing, hygiene, hand-washing, all those things much more difficult for people."

And that points to even more troubling realities.

"In the Project HOME community, we've always understood that homelessness is the canary in the mine. It's the prophetic call to all of us that there's something radically wrong in our society if anybody is living on our streets."

'NONE OF US ARE HOME UNTIL ALL OF US ARE HOME'

In two days of following Scullion in her rounds of December meetings with organizational partners, staff and board members and in her



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion celebrates the March 2016 groundbreaking for a new Project HOME apartment building on North Broad Street in Philadelphia (Courtesy of Project HOME/Harvey Finkle)

encounters with Project HOME clients, Scullion’s passion, warmth and love of people proved to be the perfect antidote to the seemingly cold and affluent office buildings, high-end hotels and condominiums in downtown Philadelphia — or Center City, as residents call it — that can seem hostile to the needs of those who seek a respite or solution to life without a home.

Tuesdays start off with a half-hour informal staff gathering, a time for staff and volunteers to come together and reflect on the past week, look ahead to the next and affirm the tenets of the organization, which was founded in 1989 by Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon, who is Project HOME’s associate executive director and chief financial officer.

The staff members recite in unison the organization’s vision statement — “None of us are home until all of us are home” — and Scullion, one of several staffers who spoke at this particular December meeting, affirmed the need to draw on “acts of kindness.”

“Today, in the world we’re living in, it’s so important to find the things that do feed our souls,” she said.

Scullion and her colleagues do that by creating and nurturing an inviting work environment. After seven years, every Project HOME employee is entitled to a one-month paid sabbatical, a policy Scullion said is borne from the demands

of often-difficult jobs.

“This is hard work, and it’s good for people to recharge,” Scullion said while briskly walking to an appreciation breakfast at a local diner for staff members with December birthdays.

Project Home’s roots were rather humble, said Edel Howlin, spokesperson for Project HOME. It started as a winter shelter, but Scullion and McConnon soon realized that the end of winter did not mean needs ended.

“They thought they couldn’t just send folks away after building relationships with them throughout the winter. It was there that the idea of figuring out how to offer housing, opportunity for employment, medical care and education was born,” Howlin wrote in an email to GSR. “The thinking [was] that if you can provide all of these things to a person, they need never be homeless again.”

Philanthropists took notice, including the family of John Middleton, principal owner of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team, “who wanted to combine their resources with other philanthropists to really do some positive work for change in Philly and it has made a difference. We have opened a new building nearly every year for the last six years,” she wrote.

Philadelphia has one of the highest rates of poverty of any large U.S. city, the Pew Charitable Trusts said in a 2019 report. But because of the work of Project HOME and other groups, Philadelphia has a low rate of those experiencing street homelessness.

A 2019 assessment of Project HOME’s three decades of work noted:

Philadelphia has made substantial progress. Our street counts, though hovering above 900 people in recent years, are the lowest of the nation’s ten largest cities, despite a staggeringly high poverty rate (26 percent, or approximately 400,000 Philadelphians). By comparison, Los Angeles, with three times Philadelphia’s population, has a poverty rate of 18.6 percent and a homeless population



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, right, at a December 2019 meeting of Project HOME staff in Philadelphia (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

of 22,887. Leadership and partnership from people, organizations, and government agencies across the region and country have played a critical role in creating a future of hope for so many.



David Brown helps manage a used-clothing boutique store in Philadelphia run by Project HOME and rents an apartment in a building the agency built. (GSR file photo)

David Brown, who was once homeless and now helps manage a used-clothing boutique store run by Project HOME, rents an apartment in a building the agency built. He said the affirmation he has received from Scullion and Project HOME is a recognition of simple dignity and humanity.

“It feels good to pay rent, to pay taxes,” he said, adding that Project HOME recognizes that those living as homeless are not and should not be rendered invisible.

“You can’t hide the homeless,” he said. “They’re in the community already.”

Project HOME is part of a larger movement, what Scullion calls a broad effort nationally and globally to deal with poverty, the root cause of homelessness.

“With homelessness, there are a lot of adverse factors,” Scullion said. Unaffordable health care, institutional racism and endemic poverty all contribute to a cycle that groups like Project HOME are trying to break, she said.

It is all of a piece, Scullion said.

“What we say at Project HOME is HOME: H, affordable housing; O, opportunities for employment; M, medical care; and E, education. The single most important thing to ending homelessness today is affordable housing. The simple most important thing to ending homelessness for the future is a quality education for every single child,” she said.

Those were challenges before the pandemic. Now, Scullion argues that COVID-19 “has shown us how devastating not having a home can be, not only for the person experiencing homelessness, but for our whole community.”



From left: Sylvester Mobley, the founder and executive director of Coded by Kids, a Philadelphia-based organization promoting and providing technology education for young people; Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion; and Melanie Hidalgo-Britt, Coded by Kids’ revenue officer, in December. Project HOME and Coded by Kids are working to establish an education partnership. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Sylvester Mobley, the founder and executive director of Coded by Kids, a Philadelphia-based organization promoting and providing technology education for young people, has been working with Project HOME to establish an education partnership. He said Scullion and Project HOME are an important force in the city.

“She’s always been someone I respected,” he said.

Mobley said Scullion and Project HOME understand that the present focus on economic and social inequalities are part of a larger arc.

“The inequality isn’t new. It’s the same inequality we saw six months, six years ago,” he said. Recent protests locally and nationally “are forcing people to acknowledge a situation they didn’t want to acknowledge before.”

PERSONAL HISTORY ROOTED IN PHILADELPHIA

Scullion, 66, is a native Philadelphian, with a warm accent to prove it. Her parents, Sheila and Joseph Scullion, were both Irish immigrants, and neither had a high school education. In fact, neither graduated from eighth grade, she said.

The two met in Philadelphia, had two daughters and settled in an Irish-American enclave in the city’s northeast area. Her mother was a waitress and her father a bartender and clerk for the Philadelphia City Council. Scullion’s younger sister, Sheila Scullion, is a nurse who lives in St. Croix and at one point ran for governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Church played an important part in the Scullion family life. But Scullion said her experience at Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls was pivotal because it exposed her to the work of the Sisters of Mercy.

She knew the sisters first as teachers, mainly in math, a subject she enjoyed and mastered. But the important embrace came in high school, when Scullion volunteered with the sisters at a Mercy-run summer camp, Camp Ozanam, for underprivileged children.

“I just really liked the work that the Sisters of Mercy did, and I thought, ‘That’s what I want to do,’ “ she said.

Scullion applied to join the community as a high school senior and was told to wait a year. Her parents thought she should finish college and “have more life experience before I made the commitment,” she said.

“My response was, ‘This is really what I feel very passionately about. If I go in and it’s not a



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, right, meets with fellow Mercy Sr. Eileen Sizer in December at the Hub of Hope, a safe space for those experiencing homelessness, in Suburban Station in downtown Philadelphia. The locale is part of a partnership between the city of Philadelphia, Project HOME and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, or SEPTA. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

good fit, I leave.’ You know what I mean? Like, I get it out of my system. Let me. I felt very strongly about being a Sister of Mercy.”

Scullion said the guiding influence of the Mercy charism, which affirms dignity, excellence, justice, service and stewardship, was “absolutely” a defining factor in wanting to become a member of the congregation.

“What I loved about the Sisters of Mercy was the work they did in the camp for underprivileged kids, for tutoring kids and helping their families in struggling neighborhoods. That’s really what I wanted to do.”

Scullion attended Temple University in Philadelphia for one year before earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology from St. Joseph’s University, a Jesuit university, and then a master’s degree in social work from Temple University’s School of Social Administration.

She joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1972, when she was a student at St. Joseph’s. She professed temporary vows in 1975, graduated from St. Joseph’s in 1976, and made final vows in 1980.

The time at St. Joseph’s University proved significant in unexpected ways. Fr. Ed Brady, a Jesuit priest at the school, asked students to



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion in 1987 (Courtesy of Project HOME/Harvey Finkle)

volunteer at local soup kitchens. Hunger was a big issue on campuses in the early '70s — much more so than homelessness, Scullion said.

“There were federal policies in place that addressed affordable housing and made the resources available for affordable housing,” she said. “The economic divide was not as large as it is today. There were many factors that played into most people [having] a place to call home.”

As a student volunteer at St. John’s Hospice in Philadelphia, a soup kitchen primarily for men, Scullion and other students started to notice that “at the end of a line, there were a few women. That was highly unusual.”

Scullion and the sisters found space at St. Rita’s, a local bingo hall, and set up 10 cots for the women.

“We’d sleep over and get breakfast,” she said. “We just did that because they had no place to go.”

That was the start of Scullion’s homeless



Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion eats cake in the late 1980s with women from Women of Hope, a Philadelphia organization that cares for homeless women with mental illness that Scullion started in 1985 (Courtesy of Project HOME/Harvey Finkle)

ministry. In 1976, the Mercy sisters established Mercy Hospice, a shelter for women, especially those with mental illnesses, under the auspices of the Philadelphia Archdiocese. In the 1980s, Scullion helped form several homeless Philadelphia ministries focused on the needs of those who are mentally ill or have special needs.

Though she now lives alone in a Project HOME residence, Scullion’s ties to the congregation remain strong.

“Sister Mary is a woman of faith, action and energy,” Sr. Patricia Vetrano, president of the Sisters of Mercy Mid-Atlantic Community, said in a statement to GSR, calling Scullion’s ministry at Project HOME a “clear” reflection of the congregation’s mission.

“Sister Mary is a woman of compassion, nurturing relationships among and beyond the Project HOME community. She has a powerful voice to speak truth to power and encourages others to join with her in working for a more just society.”

TEACHERS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE

In 1976, the year Scullion graduated from college, Philadelphia hosted the 41st International Eucharistic Congress. Four of the most respected Catholics at the time attended and delivered



From left: President Bill Clinton, Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion, Joan Dawson McConnon, and Jon Bon Jovi at the 2006 dedication of a new Project HOME building in Philadelphia (Courtesy of Project HOME/Harvey Finkle)

remarks: Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the superior general of the Society of Jesus; Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity; Dom Hélder Câmara, the Brazilian archbishop and leading proponent of liberation theology; and the American peace activist Dorothy Day.

Scullion recalls Arrupe saying, “If there is hunger anywhere in the world, the Eucharist is incomplete everywhere in the world.”

It’s no accident that Project HOME’s motto echoes that statement. Those remarks “struck a deep chord in me,” Scullion said.

So did the example of Day, who died shortly after the congress. Scullion, who met Day several times, said she is indebted to Day’s commitment to “the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and a spirit of hospitality and making room for the person who crosses your path.”

Scullion said Day was an example that “faith doesn’t give us answers. It gives us courage.”

Scullion also credits her other Project HOME colleagues, including McConnon, as teachers.

“Quite honestly, I think in addition to some of my key mentors, I would say that people who are experiencing homelessness were my greatest teachers,” she said.

Scullion has earned other important allies and supporters in her ministry, including former President Bill Clinton and musician, humanitarian and New Jersey neighbor Jon Bon Jovi.

Scullion’s friendship with Bon Jovi in particular is the stuff of Project HOME lore, Howlin said. A roadie for Bon Jovi came to Philadelphia in the winter of 2005, looking for organizations to support, and met Scullion.

“She and Jon later met and clicked right away,” Howlin said.

In its 2009 blurb about Scullion, Time magazine noted Scullion’s “ribald sense of

humor” and reported that when Bon Jovi “described Mary to the press as a nun ‘who swears and spits,’ the good sister merely replied, ‘I do not spit.’”

Scullion offers support for Bon Jovi’s humanitarian work, and Bon Jovi previously served on Project HOME’s board of directors. The musician also provided financial support for JBJ Soul Homes, a 55-unit low-income housing project in which onetime homeless residents are offered on-site recovery services and activities.

Hanging on the wall of Scullion’s Project HOME office is a large framed diploma in Latin: her honorary 2017 doctorate from Georgetown University. It is not her only honorary degree; in May, Scullion received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. Her work and role in the community also led Rep. Dwight Evans, D-Pennsylvania, to invite Scullion to President Donald Trump’s 2020 State of the Union address.

When she won the Time magazine recognition in 2009, Scullion said at the time she was “profoundly grateful and moved by this honor.”

“But the crucial message is the urgent need to respond to those men, women and children who are still on our streets and in our

shelters,” she added. “I urge all persons to get involved to advocate, donate and volunteer. Find an organization that does effective work in developing housing and services for people who are homeless and offer financial support as well as your time and talent.”

The priority should be the people and the work that still needs to be done, she told GSR.

“People on the street are a prophetic presence, calling our society to a radical transformation of values and spirituality,” she said. “Again, working with or just talking with people, being with people who were on the street, there’s no pretense, no ... I don’t know how to describe it except it’s a very humbling, authentic experience.”

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A homeless person in New York City sleeps among belongings Aug. 31. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)

Solving homelessness takes political will, money and individualization, sisters say

Nov 23, 2020

by **Chris Herlinger**

Grand Valley Catholic Outreach recently completed a handsome new 34-unit apartment building for youth experiencing homelessness in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Benedictine Sr. Karen Bland, the agency's executive director, is justifiably proud of the new facility, meant for people ages 18 to 24 and intended to ease a growing homelessness problem on Colorado's Western Slope. The area, known for its rugged mountains, swift running rivers and windswept valleys, is experiencing growing population pressures in cities like Grand Junction, where about 60,000 people live.

But Bland said housing is only one solution to the problem of homelessness. She said homelessness is an immensely complex issue, and each person's circumstances are so unique that the only way to solve the problem is, essentially, by doing so one person at a time.

"Yes, they need food, clothing and housing, but then they need resources," Bland told Global Sisters Report, citing the importance of education, job training, addiction treatment, mental health treatment or a host of other issues people made poor can and do face.

"You can have the same situation in one locality and need very different resources somewhere else," she said. "What are the circumstances? What are the resources there?"

In a year that saw a global health pandemic, an international economic downturn and, at the United Nations, a new focus on homelessness, that respect for particular situations, resources and, ultimately, solutions is a cornerstone for solving the dilemma of homelessness, advocates say.



Sr. Margaret O'Dwyer, left, and Sr. Jean Quinn, co-chairs of the nongovernmental organization Working Group to End Homelessness, an advisory group of religious congregations and other organizations. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Elizabeth Madden, who is Irish and last experienced homelessness in Ireland 16 years ago, agreed, saying there cannot be an overall singular solution to homelessness because homelessness takes different forms.

“Similar to addiction, or mental health, homelessness is a cause of something,” said Madden, who participated in the United Nations’ first meetings on the topic of homelessness in February. “Each individual’s story and recovery from homelessness will be different.”

Respect for difference and individual experience is a must, said Sr. Margaret O’Dwyer, one of two representatives of the Company of the Daughters of Charity at the United Nations, and Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA International, a U.N.-based coalition of Catholic congregations focused on concerns of women, children, migrants and the environment.

The two women are the co-chairs of the

nongovernmental organization Working Group to End Homelessness, an advisory group of religious congregations and other organizations that was highly visible during the February United Nations meetings, held by the U.N.’s Commission for Social Development, one of the U.N.’s principal bodies dealing with development issues.

Quinn, who founded and headed the Irish agency Sophia Housing before becoming UNANIMA’s executive director in 2017, said in an interview that any solution to homelessness must involve housing. But housing by itself cannot be a solution unless it is “housing with support,” she said.

Echoing the concerns of Bland in Colorado, Quinn said those experiencing homelessness need services to help them overcome the attendant challenges of their lives, whether it be domestic violence, addiction or lack of job skills. She calls it “wraparound” support.

O’Dwyer agreed.

“You need a building, but you also need those support services,” she said. “People need food, children need to be educated. It’s multifaceted.”

Madden’s experience bears out that wisdom.

“The reasons why I ended up homeless varied at different points in my life,” she said. “Once, I was escaping a domestic violence relationship, but ended up displaced in a treatment center for addiction. Addiction wasn’t my problem at that point, but I had nowhere else to go, and it was safe.”

A key factor in her leaving homelessness was in finding supported housing in which a social worker helped her through problems “until I got to a place in my life where I felt independent enough to take control of my own life.” Such support came through Sophia Housing.

Supported housing may not be “an overall solution” for all people at all times, Madden said, but “it is a solution,” though one that requires time, finances and resources.

The need for different types of support for

those experiencing homelessness point to a basic fact, said Mercy Sr. Eileen Boffa in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

“It doesn’t sound nice, but it’s just about money. We need lots and lots of money,” she said.

She runs a large furniture drive in Bridgeport for those who recently moved from living on the streets into apartments but are unable to fill them. She also leads spiritual retreats for people experiencing homelessness.

And from her vantage point, “if the United States is really serious” about fixing poverty and homelessness, the government would invest in public affordable housing, mental illness and substance abuse problems, to name a few.

Not only are there not enough places where the housing-insecure can live, Boffa said, but the places that are available to them are often overpriced “ratholes,” with tenants paying \$700 to \$800 per month for a single room in a roach-infested apartment with roommates.

If the government were to own properties for this group of people, it would eliminate the “slum landlords” who sometimes don’t live in the same state as their tenants, rarely fixing what’s broken while charging too much for rent, Boffa said.

“The folks would pay 30% of their income — the whole thing, you keep all those rules — but we have to get rid of slum landlords,” she said. “And the only way I can think of that is if the government created enough property for people to live in nice, dignified housing.”

That requires political change and is made all the more daunting by the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, which has highlighted the need to tackle longstanding social problems like homelessness.

Sisters in housing ministry around the world

Since we launched our A Place to Call Home series in February, we received almost 100 responses to our invitation to tell us of sisters’ efforts to address homelessness and affordable housing issues worldwide. Using those responses, we created this interactive map

showcasing sisters’ work. Get a closer look at the map.

Mark McGreevy, who heads the U.K.-based nongovernmental organization Depaul International, which focuses on homelessness, agreed with Quinn, O’Dwyer and others that housing alone is not a singular solution. But in the United Kingdom, he said, the COVID-19 response proved that street homelessness can be nearly ended.

He said at the onset of the pandemic in the United Kingdom, more than 90% of those experiencing street homelessness — referred to in the United Kingdom as “street sleepers” — were moved “mainly into hotels within three weeks,” and the British government is now focused on long-term solutions.

“It isn’t the end of homelessness,” McGreevy told GSR in an email, “but it shows what can be done. All it takes is political will, good quality accommodation and the right support services in place to respond to individual need. If we can build on the learning that this is how we should always treat homeless and vulnerable people, then I think we can make progress.”

Experiences like Madden’s, Quinn said, are proof that that homelessness is not a permanent condition.

“Sometimes people think that homelessness is a life. It’s not,” she said. “It’s only a part of some people’s journey.”

Sisters whose ministries focus on housing and homelessness say progress is possible, but it must always be mindful of local experiences and dynamics. And in every place, there are complexities and challenges.

A NEED TO AFFIRM DIGNITY FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Residents who stay in the Home of the Good Shepherd, a transition home for recovering addicts in San Juan, the capital of the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, receive a number of benefits during their stay, including job training

and treatments.

But Sr. Rosemarie González says that can be a disadvantage when someone is ready to leave the home.

When González, a School Sister of Notre Dame who up until recently was the director of the transition home, asked the residents what they think would keep them off the streets, they emphasized community and family.

“If that’s a good experience, using drugs or leaving the home will be minimal because they’ll feel accepted in a group,” she said.

They should also be kept busy, González said, noting that in the area, there’s very little to do other than go to the beach. Residents said it would be helpful to have recreational activities such as sports or volunteering and support groups to keep them engaged socially, perhaps with a motivating leader in charge, to help keep them oriented. They also mentioned that it would be helpful for the social workers in Puerto Rico to conduct follow-ups by visiting their usual spot in the streets rather than expecting the individual experiencing homelessness to go to the offices for their appointments.

“They feel the government should loosen up on the bureaucracy of obtaining permanent housing — all the documents, all the inspections, everything that takes so long or makes it practically impossible or very hard for someone, especially if they’re a person who needs help,” González said.

González said the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has designed its affordable housing program “almost exclusively” for the chronically homeless, and those about to transition out of Home of the Good Shepherd don’t qualify for housing vouchers that subsidize rent.

“If that person wanted to get a voucher, they’d have to go the streets and be in the cycle all over again,” she said. “That type of policy I don’t understand, and I think it does more harm than good.”



The lobby of the Home of the Good Shepherd in San Juan, Puerto Rico, has a gallery wall with framed articles featuring the home, as well as group photos of residents. Here, Sr. Rosemarie González shares memories of a group of people, some of whom are now deceased, who started a business together. (GSR photo / Soli Salgado)

In Vietnam, St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Léonard Huynh Thi An runs the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang, which offers free accommodation and care to 30 women between the ages of 70 and 100. She said more government intervention is needed in order to solve homelessness among elderly people who have been abandoned on the streets.

This is especially needed now with an increase in homelessness caused by the pandemic’s economic downturn, she said.

Though An has support among donors, benefactors and volunteers, she said she sees a need for more facilities and plans to get building permits from the government to build additional facilities.

An, who has worked with abandoned elderly for years, said those who are admitted into her facility “feel safe and loved, enjoy their personal freedom, have human dignity respected and especially want to stay at the home until death.”

The need to affirm human dignity is also central to the mission of Upendo Street Children, a project run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Kitale, a town in western Kenya about 280 miles from Nairobi, Kenya’s capital.



St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Léonard Huynh Thi An, top left, moves an elderly woman in a wheelchair into the chapel at the Elderly Loving Home in Da Nang, Vietnam. (Joachim Pham)

Run by Sr. Winnie Mutuku, the project seeks to restore dignity to children experiencing homelessness, to educate them and reunite them with their families. Mutuku said everyone deserves a home with love and care.

“Many people have never known why others live in the streets. But I wish they could understand that no one chooses to be poor or to live in the streets,” Mutuku said. “Whenever I see people living in the streets or being homeless, then I think of God being homeless, because we were created in his own image.”

There are no official figures on the number of homeless children in Kenya. However, experts estimate that there could be around 300,000 children living and working on the streets, with more than 60,000 of them in Nairobi.

A 2015 Child Rescue Kenya report estimates that there are more than 700 children in the streets of Kitale. Many of them came to the street for a variety of reasons, the most important of which were broken families and poverty.

Mutuku said religious sisters running orphanages and charity centers are advocating for family care as the solution to street



Sr. Winnie Mutuku gives food to the street children in Kitale, a town in western Kenya, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (Provided photo)

homelessness for children.

“Family conflicts and breakups are one of the main factors contributing to street children and homelessness,” Mutuku said. “I personally visit families and hold workshops at the church to teach the community about the importance of family.”

“Every child deserves a home. At our center, we’re trying to reintegrate these children into family rather than keeping them. An orphanage is not the permanent solution to homelessness. But if we teach and empower families, then there will be no children in the streets,” she said.

Mutuku added that poverty needs to be addressed, as it is a key factor causing homelessness, though it is not the only one.

“We are teaching women how to make money by opening small businesses. Our center is already planning to collaborate with the guardians of some of the children to build them houses,” she said. “If we deal with what causes homelessness, then we won’t have homeless people.”

FOR WOMEN RELIGIOUS, ‘THE GOSPEL IN ACTION’

The United Nations estimates that 1.6 billion



A street child sleeps on a sidewalk in Nairobi, Kenya. There are many socioeconomic factors in families that contribute to the increase of street children in Kenya. These include poverty, lawlessness, alcohol and drug abuse, social permissiveness, family breakup and child abuse. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



A homeless family warms by a fire along a road in New Delhi, India, on Nov. 9. (CNS/Reuters/Danish Siddiqui)

people live in inadequate housing throughout the world. The reasons for their homelessness are complex and varied, as Madden’s experience proves.

Madden said she might not have experienced homelessness at all if she “had more family support and [if] my family had a property for me to stay at.”

Advocates like Quinn and O’Dwyer say the United Nations and other bodies — governmental and nongovernmental, international, national and local — need to continue to address the structural problems of income inequality and affordable housing.

The U.N. is an appropriate venue for such work, they say, given the U.N.’s ongoing commitment to eliminate world poverty and other social ills by the year 2030 through 17 sustainable development goals.

But it is also important, they say, to continue putting more focus on the issue of homelessness specifically, noting that housing is enshrined as a human right in the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The preliminary work at the U.N. this year represents “a small step,” said Quinn, but a necessary one. “We have to keep this at the forefront,” she said.

Quinn and O’Dwyer said they hope homelessness and housing can be taken up as themes by the U.N.’s General Assembly within the next few years, as the issue is important both to the contemporary world and to the arc of justice.

“It’s the Gospel,” O’Dwyer said. “It’s the Gospel in action.”



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