

## Forum

# Homes for the Homeless

## An Interview with Sister Joan Kirby

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*In recognition of 1987 as "International Year of the Homeless," and because Homes for the Homeless represents an innovative approach to a planning-related problem, carolina planning interviewed Sister Joan Kirby, Executive Director of Homes for the Homeless.*

**CP:** We would like to discuss the homelessness problem from both a national and a local (New York City) perspective. First, who comprises the nation's homeless population?

**KIRBY:** The most recent survey that I've seen, which was a survey of 47 (U.S.) cities, reported that families with children make up the largest segment of the homeless population. They currently represent 35 percent of the homeless population. The federal government estimates that there are 250,000 homeless people in the country, and the Coalition for the Homeless estimates 3,000,000. This large discrepancy is due to the fact that the federal government is not looking for a big number. The federal government does not count the huge population of homeless people who are afraid to go to the shelters, or the many people who are doubled up and tripled up, or those in danger of homelessness. The Coalition gets such a large number by accounting for these individuals. The estimate is based on homelessness in the major metropolitan areas. The original number that I'm quoting (35 percent) is a figure that was published on March 31, by the Partnership for the Homeless, which also conducted a study in 47 cities. The Partnership conducted a survey among 741 public and private social service agencies. It concluded that there has been a substantial increase in homelessness between November and mid-March.

**CP:** What percent of homeless people have temporary or permanent employment?

**KIRBY:** A number of the people we serve hold jobs and

live in the shelter. In fact, there are people working in our Family Inns who go to sleep in the shelter at night. Although some of these people have full-time employment, they can't find affordable housing in New York City.

**CP:** How mobile is the homeless population? What factors have contributed to migration patterns?

**KIRBY:** I have not seen any migration in terms of individual homeless; however, our organization works mainly with families. People move from one place to another in search of jobs, and then become homeless when they don't find the jobs.

**CP:** How available are shelter and low-income housing in New York City?

**KIRBY:** Currently, the City shelters 3,600 families a night, or about 25,000 people. We're looking at a net loss of 360,000 low-income apartments in New York City alone. This is due to the increase in homeless families. There's about a one percent vacancy rate in New York City. There was a report completed for the mayor by Michael Stegman last year which states that a five percent vacancy rate is healthy for a city. So when you get down to about one percent you know why we're housing so many homeless families.

**CP:** Is the low-income housing shortage due, in part, to the J-51 program?

**KIRBY:** Absolutely. It's directly related to that, as well as the 421-A program, which is a tax abatement on new

construction. The J-51 program is an abatement on the rehabilitation of apartments. It has really encouraged new construction of luxury apartments all over the city, and no construction of low-income apartments. Although it was originally intended to be an abatement for the renovation of low-income apartments, there were loopholes in the regulations that made it possible to get tax abatements from luxury rehabs as well. That's what the program has really been used for in this city.

**CP:** What role has the City played in your efforts? Has it tried to help alleviate the types of problems you've described?

**KIRBY:** We get a daily reimbursement rate from the crisis intervention services of the City. These monies are 50 percent federal emergency monies; 25 percent state; and 25 percent city. Although the HRA (Human Resources Administration) delivers the money, the state authorizes the use of that money. We therefore deal with the city and the state in order to get reimbursements for the services we provide.

**CP:** New York City has a large number of in-rem dwellings. How do you view this housing stock and its potential for rehabilitation, both as permanent and transitional shelter for homeless families?

**KIRBY:** New York City owns 6,000 buildings in East Harlem alone. The buildings that the City owns add up to hundreds of thousands of vacant apartments. The City has been selling them to the highest bidder, claiming that there is no money available to rehabilitate them as low-income units. I don't know of any initiative on the City's part to rehabilitate vacant buildings for low-income people; and I don't know of any programs—any tax incentives—to rehabilitate old buildings. The City claims, and rightly so, that it will cost \$65-75,000 per unit to rehabilitate vacant buildings.

What the City has encouraged, and what we use in our programs, is the rehabilitation of vacant units in otherwise occupied buildings. The City's Emergency Assistance Rehabilitation Program (EARP), offers up to \$10,000 for the rehabilitation of vacant apartments in otherwise occupied buildings. About a year ago, the City said it had run out of these apartments, and that EARP funding was running low. But UHAB (Urban Homesteading Assistance Board) identified 200 apartments. We are now working to get a line of credit from a bank because of a requirement to pay some costs up front. Until we have a family in a unit, the City will not reimburse us for the cost of rehabilitating that unit.

**CP:** Is this a part of the Family Inns program?

**KIRBY:** No. Our Family Inns program is what we call



*Transitional housing for homeless families.*

Phase I. Our goal is to service 1,000 families within the five boroughs. In Phase I, we purchase a hotel, a hospital, or other vacant building, to house homeless families for a temporary period of time. We've had about a forty percent turnover in the South Bronx. In fact, there are thirty-six families being placed in permanent housing in the next few weeks. We help these families locate permanent housing through EARP and UHAB, but also by working with the City's permanent housing program for homeless families.

**CP:** Describe the Family Inns concept.

**KIRBY:** It's a plan that provides certain services to homeless families. These services include on-site day care, meals, and an around-the-clock security group which we call the "peace keepers". We provide one worker per twenty-five families. The workers are the basic component in the Family Inns program. We'd like to offer more services. I think it's repeatable; in fact, we'd love to see it repeated.

**CP:** Which City agencies are most involved in this program?

**KIRBY:** We work with HRA on transitional housing, and with HPD (Housing Preservation and Development) on permanent housing.

**CP:** Has the City of New York shown any willingness to coordinate its efforts with non-profits and other neigh-



*Provision of services contributes to the success of the Family Inns program.*

neighborhood housing developers to provide housing, or does it work primarily through City agencies?

**KIRBY:** We are a not-for-profit, and we get our reimbursement monies from the City. But we're not a City agency by any means. We associate closely with the Emergency Alliance for Children, the Coalition for the Homeless, the Partnership for the Homeless, Catholic charities, and other not-for-profit providers in the field. We've had a wonderfully successful relationship with UHAB, at the Cathedral (of Saint John the Divine), and with a group called "Banana Kelly," in the South Bronx. They are a rehab construction company that has been providing us with permanent apartments for our families in the South Bronx. Our goal is to reach out to all of the local service organizations, and to get them to help us place families.

**CP:** New York City currently has a surplus of funds (from Municipal Assistance Corporation, Battery Park fees and World Trade Center payments in lieu of taxes). These funds are the basis of a ten-year "affordable" housing plan being touted by Governor Cuomo and Mayor Koch. Briefly describe the plan. Are you satisfied with this plan? Are you satisfied with its treatment of the homeless population?

**KIRBY:** I don't have much faith in that kind of initiative for the families we serve because most of those initiatives — they call them low-income initiatives — are targeted for families who earn \$18–23,000 annually, and we serve people who live on \$7–8,000 per year. Battery Park City is targeted for low- to moderate-income families, and the New York City Partnership also is initiating housing for

low- to moderate-income families. But when they say "low," they're talking about \$17,000 per year, at the low end of the scale. That doesn't help us at all. Ours are very low-income people who need to be serviced through public housing, through federal monies.

There is an initiative that has been very successful. It's a title demonstration program from the federal government called the Nehemiah housing program. It encourages low- to moderate-income homeownership. Again, this program will not service our people, but if there is enough on that level, maybe some will open up and be available for our people.

**CP:** Are many of the homeless families whom you serve former residents of welfare hotels?

**KIRBY:** The welfare hotels are the City's means for warehousing families. They are dangerous, fearsome, and the very worst places to house children. Our goal has been to put the welfare hotels out of business — that's why we became involved with the homeless. We get referrals from the welfare hotels. We also get referrals from the congregate shelters that the City runs. They're dormitory-like places where the beds are all lined up next to each other. We're trying to offer a more compassionate and humane solution to the welfare hotels. Granted, we have families living in one room. If there are older family members, or many children, we give them two rooms. It's not an ideal arrangement; it's transitional housing. That's why we work so hard to have a six-month turnaround to get our families into permanent housing.

**CP:** Has legislation been introduced to crack down on slumlords of welfare hotels? What sort of legislation might be effective in combatting this problem?

**KIRBY:** No legislation has been introduced that I know of. (Councilmember) Ruth Messenger has talked about getting the City to take them over through eminent domain. From time to time the City says, "we're not going to send any families to the Holland Hotel because it's such an incredibly bad place." But the City is really over a barrel because there's a 25 percent increase in homeless families, so it must place them somewhere. So the City makes big announcements that it won't use certain hotels, but then it uses them anyway. It's desperate for space.

**CP:** Can welfare hotel tenants file complaints with the New York City Housing Court?

**KIRBY:** The tenants in the welfare hotels are largely represented by legal aid or individual not-for-profit legal groups. They are not under Housing Court jurisdiction because they come under the hotel laws. Therefore, a group of tenants can't go to Housing Court to redress the evils in the welfare hotels.

CP: What is the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board's (UHAB) role—past and present—in New York City's housing crisis?

KIRBY: UHAB is a not-for-profit organization which is also a project at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. It has a fifteen-year track record. Originally UHAB provided technical assistance to homestead tenants. Later, it became more interested in training, tenant organizations in home maintenance, budgeting and management of their buildings. UHAB is responsible for the technical training for most of the low-income cooperatives in the city.

HPD has a program which I can speak highly of, and in which UHAB has played an important role. That is the Tenant Interim Lease (TIL) program, whereby a building that's owned by the City can be placed in an alternative management program. If the tenants can prove over a period of a year or two that they are capable of successfully managing the building, they can buy their apartment for \$250 and continue to manage and run the building as a low-income cooperative. That's the best program in the city. UHAB has trained most of the TIL people in the city. It's in these TIL buildings—these low-income co-ops—that we are identifying the vacant apartments to be rehabilitated under EARP.

There have been negative aspects to using EARP monies, however. If you are financed by a private lender, after thirty-two months when the subsidy disappears or when the lender has been paid off for the rehab, the landowner doesn't have to keep the formerly homeless family. They're in danger of getting their rent raised on them after the thirty-two month time limit. So our goal has been to place as many as possible in a low-income tenant cooperative, where they will be admitted to ownership and absorbed into the tenant organization, to become low-income homeowners.

CP: Why is Homes for the Homeless an innovative approach to the homeless problem? How is it different from other shelters?

KIRBY: First, because of its funding: we have private monies for start-up purposes. That's innovative, but it is also empowering. Unless you have money to buy the facility and rehabilitate it, and buy the equipment and hire the staff in advance, you have no income stream. Innovative funding means we have loans from Chemical Bank which are 100 percent guaranteed by Leonard Stern of Hartz Mountain, so we have the money available to really perform—to really get into providing for homeless families.

Our programs are innovative because we're looking at empowerment of the families as a goal. Empowerment means not only moving them into a permanent apartment,

but it means providing services. If one hasn't been through high school, we offer Graduation Equivalency Degree courses. If they're not ready for the G.E.D., then they get elementary education courses through a connection that we have with the City University of New York. They have elementary education and high school equivalency education available on-site at Homes for the Homeless.

I feel that is step one toward empowerment. When I spent time in Washington, I was seeking information about the welfare reform programs that are currently under discussion. My concern is that they're not serious enough about welfare reform. If we can get them to provide an interim period with support, in terms of health insurance, food stamps and continuing family support, then it becomes worthwhile for family members to take jobs.

CP: How did you work out the educational program through the City University of New York?

KIRBY: We had a contact with the president of City University who put us in touch with the department for high school education. Funding for a course was approved by the Board of Education. It's twice a week on-site, and a third time during the week at the University, in order to use the computer facilities. In the Queens Facility, which we call the Saratoga Interfaith Family Inn, and in which there are 220 families, including teenage kids, we're really serious about job training and job experience. We're developing a learning center there with computers and word processors. We've been given a donation of word processors, and we're pretty sure to get a grant for computers and a teacher so that people can be trained in secretarial skills and the use of computers.

CP: Do you receive any federal or state funding directly, or is funding received only through the reimbursements you spoke of earlier?

KIRBY: We do not have any separate funds or contracts at the moment. We are certainly going to be looking for those. I have a foundation that is practically committed to giving us the computers, and Xerox gave us the word processors. So we've had corporate gifts and foundation gifts. What we really need are waivers in the welfare system to allow our people who are now on welfare to work and be paid.

CP: Are you referring to the workfare program?

KIRBY: No, I don't like the workfare program because they send them out to clean the subway and pick up leaves in the park. That has no dignity attached to it, and it has no incentive attached to it. There's not even an economic incentive. On the workfare program, I believe one can make \$80 every two weeks, in order not to violate one's



*at home.*

welfare payments. We're hoping to empower them to get off of welfare. We're not going to do that through workfare. I know of programs that have firm job offers—in law firms, in carpentry firms—in a lot of different skills and I want to have that kind of opening at the other end so we can have firm jobs for our people. That way, we're not just training them and then saying, "all right, go find yourself a job." The waivers would help in this transitional period.

**CP:** Could the HFH concept for housing the homeless be adapted or applied to other jurisdictions in the state or outside of the state?

**KIRBY:** Absolutely. The thing that's necessary is start-up monies. I believe that not-for-profit organizations should not have to rely on generous private donors. We have a donor, Leonard Stern, who gives us millions of dollars. But it's a government responsibility. The government should make money available. In New York City, only the Red Cross and we have start-up monies to get things going on a large scale. Women in Need has very large donors also, but they work with 20 to 30 families at a time. The way in which funding is currently structured requires organizations such as ours to form a public-private venture to get off the ground.

**CP:** What is shared housing? What are you doing to promote it?

**KIRBY:** Shared housing has been slow in starting. This is a model which we found in San Jose, California. It relies upon matching "overhoused" providers. These are families who have more space than they need and are in danger of losing their apartments because they are too expensive. We want to match these providers with seekers, or homeless families, who can contribute rent and possibly services, such as child care. We don't want this to be anything like a foster family. We don't want a superior-inferior relationship. We really take time to counsel, and to negotiate what each side is going to contribute.

**CP:** Have you instituted this program?

**KIRBY:** We haven't made our first match, but in running the ad for the first time, we got about 100 firm responses. The difficulty was in matching the seeker families with the providers. It is too risky for the seekers to give up their spots on the permanent housing list from HPD. A family must be in a shelter for 18 months before it qualifies for permanent housing. Our families are reluctant to lose their place on that list. If they're in one of our Family Inns, they're still eligible for permanent housing. We're negotiating right now with HRA to have shared housing considered as another form of transitional housing. It would cost them one-third as much money. Possibly after 18 months, the match has worked so well that they decide to stay together. The average match in San Jose is between 8 and 15 months. Some stay three years, but they keep renewing the contract. Our plan is, after a period of 18 months, to allow the families who want to stay together to drop their names from the permanent housing list and stay in a shared situation.

**CP:** What do you believe are the short- and long-term answers to homelessness? What do you believe is at the root of the homelessness problem?

**KIRBY:** The root of the homelessness problem is a cut-back in federal funds for low-income housing. The HUD low-income budget went from 34 billion in 1981 to 9.9 billion in 1986, which means that there has been less money for new construction and for housing rehabilitation and for housing services on the federal level. This has been really devastating from the point of view of low-income housing. I see that as the primary cause.

In addition, in New York City, tax incentives have encouraged the building of luxury housing, without any real incentive to provide low-income housing. While we're coping with the crisis of homeless families, the only money available for homelessness is out of the federal emergency monies. Bill HR5020 is a proposal to use the federal emergency monies for permanent housing. Everyone is screaming that we're in our seventh year of emergency funding, and there's absolutely nothing available for permanent housing. □

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