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Homeless Identification

An overlooked and crucial aspect of homelessness includes many homeless individuals who do not have various forms of identification and do not have a way of obtaining it. In the Capital Region, Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless is working to secure documents for homeless individuals. Homeless identification issues need to be addressed as a community to better serve the needs of homeless individuals, so they can secure appropriate housing and jobs.

Scope of the Problem

One of the major problems surrounding the issue of homelessness is the lack of personal identification documents that homeless people possess. Escaping the cycle of homelessness is nearly impossible if a person lacks their identification, such as their social security card or birth certificate. Homeless persons are unable to get a job or secure housing without these forms of ID. Our study aims to research the past and present policy within New York and the Capital Region in order to examine a more adequate method of obtaining homeless populations proper identification.

The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness from 2005 to 2015 in Albany County was found to be inefficient in ridding the area of homelessness and made little mention to the issue of identification. By researching these homeless policies and the policy options of other areas, there are potential models of how the Capital Region, and organizations such as Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, could

streamline the process to obtain identification for homeless people.

Past Policy

In 2001, the New York State’s Department of Motor Vehicles commissioner sharply increased the number of identification “points” required to obtain a driver’s license from two points to six. These points are assigned to different forms of identification, such as a social security card which is worth two points. This was done in an effort to combat fraudulent licenses being provided, but simultaneously had the negative effect of dramatically increasing the level of difficulty involved in obtaining a New York driver’s license or State ID. This change a was reflection of a broader



national movement to increase the security of State ID's and in 2005, upon the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission, Congress passed the REAL ID Act. This act places specific requirements on states for the issuance of photo ID. IDs that are not compliant with the REAL ID Act cannot be used at airports, certain federal buildings, or nuclear power plants. The REAL ID Act mandates that all state DMVs require proof of a driver license applicant's full legal name, date of birth, Social Security Number, principal address, and lawful status in the United States. New York currently has an extension from the Department of Homeland Security and is expected to be fully compliant with the REAL ID Act by 2020.

Current Policy

Homelessness has been and continues to be an issue that has riddled New York State and its residents. Without the proper form of identification, citizens struggle to find housing, work, and medical care. Persons that suffer from chronic homelessness frequently do not have the proper forms of identification due to a range of issues associated with their circumstances. Many homeless persons have either lost their identification, had them stolen, or never had them to begin with. Due to the current requirements surrounding obtaining identification, if a person does



not already have a state recognized ID, they cannot easily acquire one.

The first form of identification that many persons work towards is their birth certificate and a driver's license/Non-driver identification. In order to obtain this form of identification, a person must be able to provide proof of their name, identity, and social security number. This can be difficult for people who are homeless. If an individual is not able to present the proof needed to receive this form of identification, they cannot apply for jobs, housing, or other more advanced forms of ID. To get a recognized form of identification in New York, you must first have a recognized form of identification, which is unlikely for the majority of the homeless population.

Other acceptable forms of identification include: proof of identity, your Social Security card, original proof of name documents-which may include a college ID card, bank statement, or utility bill-, completed Application for Driver License or Non-Driver ID Card (Form MV-44) or a completed Application for Enhanced Driver License or Non-Driver ID Card (Form MV-44EDL) for an enhanced NY ID and photocopy of proof of Supplemental Security Income (SSI)-which may include an SSI award letter, a letter from SSA, or a benefit verification letter.

Another pressing issue for persons that are chronically homeless is they do not have the resources available to them to obtain the proper forms of identification. The process of retrieving and providing the necessary information is time consuming and economically tolling to the individual, agency, and state. The process required for an individual to get a copy of their birth

certificate can take several months and typically cost in excess of \$50. That is assuming the individual can remember their legal name and the state of birth. From there, you must enter the city or borough of birth. Assuming all these requirements are met, the individual must also have a residence or permanent location where they can receive their identification paperwork. However, because they are homeless and there are associated costs with housing homeless individuals for an extended period of time, the process once again becomes increasingly difficult and exhausts resources, especially when you multiply this process by the several thousand homeless individuals. The state, local agencies, and taxpayers are suffering from the absorbent costs of caring and providing services.

There are several policies such as “Housing First” in Utah, and the “McKinney-Vento Act” in Mississippi that have been enacted with the goal of decreasing the amount of homeless persons with mental and chronic medical conditions by providing them with housing and education. For person’s with a mental or physical disability, it is crucial to have sustainable housing and the necessary medical attention. Without the proper forms of identification, neither housing, medical care or education is a possibility. Issues such as this create several problems for states and local agencies. Making it easier for persons with disabilities to recover the proper forms of

identification would be less tolling on taxpayers and provide those in need with stable housing and access to medical care.

Utah implemented a policy based on putting the majority of their homeless population into homes at a rate that helped generate revenue for the state while solving a major issue. Since the policy was enacted the amount of homeless persons in Utah has dropped drastically and report less than 1,000 chronically homeless. The majority of persons in this system have been able to expand their horizons and start taking the steps necessary to become a contributing member to society again. Sustainable housing allows for them to have a steady address to receive documents such as a birth certificate, lowers medical costs to the individual and the burden felt by the state, and in most cases they are able to find a job and become self sustaining. This has proven to be a successful model not just for Utah but could possibly be for New York and other states across the country.

The “McKinney-Vento Act” emphasizes education by relaxing several restrictions that individuals must go through before they can go to public school. Proof of a residence is one of the requirements that must be met before an individual enters a school system. This determines what school they will attend and lets them attend the school in the district they currently reside. The policy also allows for them to register with the school without school or medical records. The hope behind relaxing several registration requirements is more homeless children will be able to attend school. High education correlates with elevated economic earnings. If this can be achieved, than less persons will be reliant on



these services and become more self sustained.

While this is one approach to help combat the large amount of homeless individuals, children that have tough times at “home” tend to have lower grades and fail out or drop out of school at a substantially higher rate than children from higher income families. This also doesn’t address the difficulty of acquiring the forms of identification that were overlooked. With the proper forms of ID, citizens would then be able to look for housing, education and work on their own, or with minimal assistance from the state or local agencies.

The Process

Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless (IPH) does not have a formal, written policy within their office. This is due largely in part because the process is based on person to person. Each individual needs an approach tailored to them, because each person is at a different place in the process. Individuals might have no form of identification for a number of

reasons such as having lost the ID or having been robbed. An individual might also have one form of identification, such as a birth certificate or a social security card. Due to this variability, each individual has a different starting point in the process and has different needs.

In order to get an Identification Card in New York State, an individual must go to the DMV and bring other forms of identification. In order to get a Driver License or a Non-driver Identification card an

individual must be able to provide proof of their name, identity and social security number. Then, they must pay a fee to receive their identification card.

When a person goes on the New York State government site and searches for NYS Identification Services and attempts to get a copy of their birth certificate, the government site sends them to an outside site called VitalChek. VitalChek is a website service that allows a person to request a copy of their personal documents. When accessing the website, a person must select which type of record they need, including a birth certificate, death certificate, marriage record or divorce record. Then a person selects if they are requesting their own birth certificate or another person’s. Next, enter the legal name of the individual and the state of birth. From there, you must enter the city or borough of birth. This takes the person to a drop down list where you must select the reason for requesting this information. Options include ID purposes, prisoner, social security or self. The fee is \$45 plus an \$8 processing fee and this does not include shipping. However, people born in Manhattan, Kings (Brooklyn), Queens, The Bronx and Staten Island, need to place their order through the New York City Department of Health (this is only made clear after completing the above steps). Despite all of these complications, IPH has identified the birth certificate as the “easiest” form of identification to obtain. The process for obtaining identification in New York is quite similar for people born in a different state.

Addressing the needs of homeless individuals requires an inclusive approach, dealing with identification problems and housing supports. Pioneered in New York City in the 1980s, permanent



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supportive housing has now proven to be a successful and cost-effective solution to the homelessness crisis. The supportive housing model combines affordable housing assistance with vital support services for individuals living with mental illness, HIV/AIDS or other serious health problems. Moreover, numerous research studies have shown that permanent supportive housing costs less than other forms of emergency and institutional care. The landmark 1990 City-State “New York/New York Agreement,” which has been renewed twice, is the premier example of a permanent supportive housing initiative that successfully reduced homelessness in New York City and saved taxpayer dollars that would otherwise have been spent on costly shelters and hospitalizations.

The study examines the economic costs associated with finding permanent housing, short stay housing, prison costs, and shelters. They found that providing funding for permanent housing for homeless persons was more cost effective than other methods and also allowed for long term development and the time/opportunity for homeless persons fighting drug/alcohol addiction.

Model Programs

Project Homeless Connect (CA)

Project Homeless Connect has provided services to the homeless population in San Francisco since 2004. Last year, they helped 94 homeless individuals gain a California State Identification. This identification is necessary to access other services such as housing and employment. Project Homeless Connect is able to provide identification services through volunteers and multiple local government agencies, nonprofits, and other organizations during

service events that bring together their services for homeless individuals.

Since 2012 Project Homeless Connect has launched Every Day Connect, which is a daily program based off of the success of these large-scale service events. Every Day Connect allows the homeless to be connected with services on a daily basis. This project functions with the help of many volunteers and the communication and cooperation between agencies.



**PROJECT
HOMELESS
CONNECT**

IDignity (FL)

IDignity is a program in Florida that provides assistance to the homeless in obtaining identification. Similarly to the method that Project Homeless Connect uses, IDignity partners with government and nonprofit agencies to create Client Service Events. With the help of over 120 volunteers these Client Service Days set up homeless individuals with services to receive state identification, birth certificates, social security cards and other documents. The homeless individual is partnered with an attorney to update him or her on the process and when he or she can pick up his or her documents free of charge. If you have attended one of the Client Services Events, you are also eligible to receive a voucher to obtain your license at no charge. The work done at IDignity would be unsustainable

without the help of volunteers and the connections made with government agencies.

IDignity started in 2008 when churches in the area began to realize the homeless population was not finding jobs because they lacked identification needed to work and get a home. Individuals decided to take action and went to their local government agencies to ask for their assistance and cooperation. This issue was brought to their attention and within time, the agencies agreed to assist the group that became IDignity.

The coordinated relationships between IDignity and these agencies, as well as, between the agencies themselves allowed for the Client Service Events to function. These agencies send some of their workers to IDignity for the day, as well as, resources to help the homeless, and it allows for homeless individuals to obtain their identification all in one day. For example, individuals from the Department of Health come to the Client Service Event and have resources in order to print a birth certificate on the spot.

IDignity also works based on donations and volunteers. Obtaining identification is not an inexpensive task, but with the issue being brought to attention more funding available to IDignity.

Another key component is the volunteer attorneys and the IDignity attorney on staff. These attorneys assist

in difficult cases when the individual needing identification is simply not able to obtain it even with the Client Service Events. The many

connections, advocates, and volunteers are precisely what have helped IDignity run so well.

Homeless I.D. Project (AZ)

The Homeless I.D. Project is based in Phoenix, Arizona and has been helping the homeless acquire identification for over 27 years. In 2015, the project “provided over 10,000 services to 5,346 people experiencing homelessness,” which assisted in obtaining birth certificates and other documents needed for Arizona State Identification and the purchase of state identification. Due to theft and destruction of identification being major issues the project also provides safe storage of documents. Caseworkers assist the homeless with tracking down the documents they may need and writing referrals to rehabilitation programs, housing services and more. These referrals can also be used in replacement of some identification, such as when requesting a birth certificate.



Assembly Bill No. 1733 Chapter 764 (CA)

Assembly Bill 1733 was effective July 1, 2015, requiring counties in California to issue free birth certificates for the homeless. On January 1, 2016 the bill required that the DMV in California to issue free identification cards or replacement ones to the homeless. Housing California was the driving force behind enacting the bill and sponsored the

IDignity

legislation. Housing California’s website describes them as, “the voice in the state Capitol for children, seniors, families, people experiencing homelessness, and everyone who needs a safe, stable, affordable place to call home.”

This bill helps organizations working to help the homeless obtain identification by taking off the financial burden of paying for identification. Homeless service providers are able to verify a person’s homeless status to ensure they get their ID free of charge. Homeless service providers include “a governmental or nonprofit agency receiving federal, state, or county or municipal funding to provide services to a ‘homeless person’ or ‘homeless child or youth,’ or that is otherwise sanctioned to provide those services by a local homeless continuum of care organization.”



Key Organizations

- **CARES Inc:** creates a system of care to eradicate homelessness by raising awareness and providing housing (“CARES NY” n.d.).
- **The New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal:** is comprised of all the state’s major housing and renewal agencies and is a very important political actor in terms of policymaking in the state (Office of Policy Research and Development 2008).
- **New York State Housing Finance Agency:** seeks to establish high quality, affordable, and multifamily rentals throughout New York State.
- **The New York State Affordable Housing Corporation:** aims to assist low and moderate-income families all over New York State in finding housing they can afford while also providing grants to help subsidize the costs (“AHC” n.d.).
- **Homeless and Travelers Aid Society:** HATAS has a host of assistance programs dealing with housing, emergency shelter and mental health issues. They work to increase the quality of services in the Capital Region (“HATAS”, n.d.).
- **Unity House:** Nonprofit based in Troy, NY, sponsors a program called the Community Housing Assistance Program. This program aims at securing permanent housing for the homeless as well as providing stipends for rent and more (“Unity House” n.d.).

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Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide researched-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

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