

New charity launched to help to solve homelessness in Bermuda

October 10, 2021 - There are many reasons why people become homeless. These may be due to a lack of affordable housing, poverty or unemployment. Equally they may be as a result of traumatic life events such as an abusive relationship or mental or physical health problems.

When people fall into homelessness, they typically already face considerable challenges. Being homeless can, in turn, make many of these problems even harder to resolve. Some people are more at risk of homelessness, for example people in low paid jobs, living in poverty or poor quality or insecure housing.

Outside of the census, there is no regular record keeping of this vulnerable population in Bermuda. Nor is there a comprehensive strategy and plan to end homelessness.

This may be about to change with the establishment of "home", a new registered charity. Its founder and chairman is Arthur Wightman and it has ambitious goals.

Mr Wightman, the Territory Leader for accounting firm PwC Bermuda, and Regional Insurance & Markets Leader of the firm, said: "Our purpose is to end homelessness in Bermuda. Homelessness represents a profound assault on dignity, social inclusion and represents a violation of basic human rights - no one in our community should face homelessness or the prospect of it."

He added: "What is astounding is that in nearly all cases homelessness is preventable and, in every case, homelessness can be ended. Through collaborative approaches we intend to help each homeless person to achieve their best life and to build the interventions necessary prevent homelessness."

At the beginning of August, and after a rigorous search, home recruited an Executive Director who is for the time being its only employee. Denise Carey has had a long career serving her country, including as Executive Director of another charity, the Sunshine League.

Ms Carey acknowledged that one employee would not be sufficient to fulfil home's ambitious purpose, but this fit with the charity's plan to build the organisation systematically.

She said: "We believe that how we do things is as important as what we do. home will be a citizen-first organization. As long as there are homeless people, or people at risk of homelessness, our focus will be on building lasting relationships with them and providing or coordinating care.

"In order to do that, my Board of Directors wants me to prioritize identifying and building relationships with the entire homeless population in Bermuda."

Mr Wightman said: "We must learn as much as we can from those afflicted in order to better inform solutions that will prevent homelessness or interventions for those who are already homeless.

"There is significant international research and evidence which will ultimately help to inform solutions but unless it works with our environment here in Bermuda it won't be fully effective."

Ms. Carey is currently working with other civic groups gathering core data about the homeless population as well as those that are housing insecure. Over the coming months this data will directly inform decision-making about the future. Of equal importance to engaging with the impacted population, home is focused on wider stakeholder engagement and collaboration.

Ms Carey said: "Homelessness impacts us all either directly or indirectly. We believe that in order to successfully end homelessness the whole community must have a voice and role. There is a lot of incredible work that already exists in support of our most vulnerable. We see a huge opportunity to help weave together our existing systems that are perhaps a little fragmented and to plug any remaining gaps."

Mr Wightman said home did not intend to replace other organizations working in the area.

He said: "One of our guiding principles for home is that of empathetic collaboration. We want to come in support of solving a most critical issue. To apply new leadership. We come with ambition, resource and a desire to make our own contributions where needed. Importantly we intend to empower local change-makers with the resources they need to grow and create larger change throughout the community where it is better that they do so."

To this end, Ms Carey and the entire Board of Directors, are undertaking to connect deeply with as wide a cross-section of stakeholders as possible. These range from existing charities to parish counsellors, feeding programmes to shelters, community clubs to the medical community, religious institutions to the municipalities. Many leading figures amongst these stakeholders have been quick to endorse home, its purpose and the role it will play.

Dr Claudette Fleming, Executive Director of Age Concern, said: "I am pleased to be apprised of the start of 'home' and its mission to collaborate with community partners to prevent, address and end homelessness in its many forms in Bermuda. The pandemic in particular has demonstrated that nonprofits can work effectively with each other and a broader sector of community stakeholders such as, the government and private sectors.

"As resources are likely to be stretched well into the foreseeable future, innovation and collaboration will be key in achieving greater success for our families and communities. Likewise, when it comes to ending homelessness, together we are better positioned to do more."

Sheelagh Cooper, Chair of Habitat for Humanity, Bermuda, said: "We recognize that the problem of homelessness in Bermuda is bigger and more complex than can be resolved by any single organisation, be it government, private initiatives or as in our case, the charitable sector.

"Having been committed to the cause since our inception in 2000 and having completed over 100 projects, we see more than ever the need for improved collaboration and we welcome the opportunity to work closely with HOME as we strive toward resolving this growing challenge to our most vulnerable families and individuals."

Donna Outerbridge, shelter manager for the Salvation Army, said: "The Salvation Army's Emergency Housing Complex located on North Street provides temporary housing, case management and a breakfast each morning to all residents. At the shelter, we assist individuals by connecting them to appropriate resources and facilitate their transitioning to independent living. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the number of people who are struggling and becoming homeless.

"We look forward to home's leadership and collaboration with all stakeholders to develop a sustainable plan to end homelessness."

Dialogue has also been extensive with the Government.

Ms Carey said: "Government is already a critical stakeholder in ending homelessness. We have been delighted by the hands-on engagement with Minister Tinee Furbert, her Permanent Secretary, and other Officers within the Government who are already delivering real support to the homeless and housing insecure. The Minister is determined to make real progress and she and her colleagues have welcomed home. We are excited by the prospect of a very fruitful relationship."

The span of touchpoints between the homeless and housing insecure and the Government is already extensive.

The Bermuda Housing Corporation (BHC) is charged with the job of housing Bermudians and has the mandate to provide affordable rental accommodation as well as affordable homes for purchase. In 2020/2021 BHC provided over \$6 million in rental assistance grants. In addition, the Government provides over \$500,000 in direct grant funds to support the operations at the emergency shelter on North Street for the unsheltered and a further \$2 million in grants to assist with housing for seniors and other vulnerable groups. Beyond that, significant support is provided through financial assistance, healthcare services, and other government departments. Public officers have also been involved in developing housing-first solutions to support the population.

In her ministerial statement The Hon. Tinee Furbert, JP, MP Minister of Social Development and Seniors stated that: "This Government is cognisant of the challenges of the unsheltered and we will continue to fine-tune our response to assisting the unsheltered and collaborate with the third sector to ensure that resources are directed to those most in need."

The Minister has welcomed early and regular dialogue with the Chairman and Executive Director of home. "We welcome the opportunity to collaborate to create a homeless plan that encapsulates the goals of home and the Government," she said.

While its initial focus is on the homeless community including those at risk of homelessness as well as stakeholders operating in the sector, home views the wider community as being equally important in achieving its overall purpose.

Ms Carey said: "It's incredible quite how many people's lives have been impacted by homelessness. Trauma exists not just for a homeless person but also their family members, friends and other relationships. Our solutions will include support for those more widely impacted."

She added: "It would be easy to assume that homelessness may be both a cause of and one of the more extreme outcomes of poverty but that is also an oversimplification. There are many causes of homelessness and many types of homeless people. Care must be taken to pay particular attention to family homelessness, women, children, adolescents, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, people sleeping from sofa to sofa or living in cars and recently incarcerated and not just assume our homeless community represents the guys sitting by the flagpole on Front Street.

"Unless we look at the entire spectrum of homelessness, we will fall short in developing solutions. This is why we consider people living in inadequate housing, such as insecure accommodation, people living under threat of eviction, people living under threat of violence, people living in temporary, non-conventional structures, people living in unfit housing and people living in extreme overcrowding amongst our target population. Not just roofless or homeless. Many of these people are invisible to much of the community but not all."

Mr Wightman added: "All of this points to the importance of engaging with our wider community to help deliver an end. With greater awareness, understanding and empathy we can create an environment where we all show respect towards homeless persons and treat them with dignity as you would do with anyone else. Better still we hope to enroll members of our community – volunteers – to advocate for the rights of homeless people to live a dignified life. This means, over the long term, creating a hands-on, caring relationship with a vulnerable human being as they move towards living their best life."

Ms Carey said: "Homelessness is indeed an assault on social inclusion. There is no doubt that our purpose is focused on supporting social justice. We call on all of our community to offer time, ideas, advocacy and focus to help to end this social crisis, which, compounded by the pandemic, has been silently growing over the years, expanding the gap between the rich and the poor."

Mr Wightman said home would use data, much of which exists already, to drive decision-making.

He added: "It would be easy to adopt solutions that work elsewhere only to find out that they won't work in Bermuda. Equally, if we are not open to listening to the current homeless or housing insecure, we can't possibly begin to understand the existing trauma and symptoms. For us as a nation to be successful, we must be citizen-led, data-driven and evidence-based. By carefully understanding the status quo and existing systems we can collaborate across Bermuda to build a plan that has a high chance of success. One which will be delivered in the most humane but also efficient way."

Ms Carey said home's goal was to build towards a national plan to end homelessness.

She said: "Working with the Government and other stakeholders we will lead a process which allows this widespread engagement to feed directly into the solutions that are developed. And we ultimately want the change to be delivered right across Bermuda, through Government, home, our community partners and of course Bermudians from all walks of life. This multi-year national plan is not ours, it is Bermuda's."

Mr Wightman said Ms Carey said that in addition to finding medium and long-term ways to end homelessness, there were homeless people in immediate need.

Mr Wightman said: "From the beginning we have always said that the quality of our relationships and the creation of trust with the homeless and housing insecure is of paramount importance. We will not jeopardize that by promising things today that we can't deliver. We are looking to be sincere in all of our interactions in order to give confidence that we will always advocate for each individual and try and make incremental change, no matter how small, to their lives as we build towards the bigger solutions."

Ms Carey added: "As we build relationships in the immediate term, we will triage the population so that those with critical, immediate term needs are supported using existing solutions or care-givers. Similarly, we have already begun to identify quick-wins which we know will be part of the national plan that we will bring online in the more immediate term.

"We are so optimistic that homelessness can be ended that we invite all of Bermuda to share in that positive outlook and to engage constructively with insight and support. Come with us on this."

With only one employee, home has started out very lean. The Board has other organizational ambitions for the charity beyond its service to the homeless.

Mr Wightman said: "We will be influenced by leading organisational, including certain corporate, practices in order to obtain social objectives. Our purpose is all about directly and positively changing the lives of others and we feel that the more innovative, humane, effective and efficient we are the better we will be at delivering quantifiable outcomes against key metrics."

He added: "Our Board is very diverse, comprising social workers and advocates as well as businesspeople and technologists. This allows us to apply more critical thinking to designing inclusive services that leverage technology to reduce inequalities in outcomes. It allows a new culture to form that is values driven which in turn enables innovative ideas to come to the surface. As we develop new structures and processes, we are able to more obsessively focus on the experiences of the homeless."

Mr Wightman said this approach should encourage investors and donors to increase funding for the homeless and thanked those who had given support so far.

Home said that according to Crisis, the UK's national charity for homeless people, "homelessness is not inevitable. With collective action and political will, we can end it once and for all". Unsurprisingly this is the leadership call from one of Bermuda's newest charities. Their style and approach is refreshing – where collaborative and caring values lead the way – closely followed by a way of working that seeks to drive the biggest impact in the most efficient, coordinated and humane way.

Mr Wightman said: "Our most vulnerable have the quietest voices and lowest chances of living the lives that every human deserves. We want to change that - not simply to house them or feed them - but to ensure that they are loved, wanted and that our community is looking out for them."

Ma Carey concluded: "I am so inspired by the opportunity. The path will not be easy but I have every confidence that collectively we will rise to end homelessness, once and for all."

If you need help or want to help please call, WhatsApp or email Ms Carey on 599-9933 or denise@home.bm.