

*The Manna Society
Newsletter
Christmas 2015*



May the warmth and
joy
of the Christmas
Season
remain with you
throughout
the coming year.

The complexity of homelessness and our response to it as a society

By
Bandi Mbubi
Manna Centre Director



For most of us in society, when we think of homeless people, the first image which comes to mind is that of a person we have seen on a street corner. Perhaps sitting down with their hat placed in front of them, begging money from passers-by. Perhaps sleeping rough on a doorway. Perhaps at a local park, walking their dog, with a large cider bottle in their hand. In these encounters, it is easy to forget that they have a family, or once did, that they are someone's daughter or son, a brother, a sister. Hearing from them, we often come to understand that though family and friends can be a great source of strength and support, they can also be the cause of a person's downfall. Many homeless people have experienced physical and mental abuse at the hands of people they love, or once did. They may indeed have been the perpetrators of abuse themselves. At a personal level, consciously or subconsciously, their inclination is often to get as far away as possible from past relationships which have come to embody so much pain for them.

Moving away from family and friends when we perceive them as a source of so much pain can be liberating. In some context, it can even be the beginning of genuine spiritual growth. However, this is not often the case for many homeless people. It can become a lonely existence. Having no meaningful relationships in one's life can be debilitating in that as human beings we are social animals. We find a sense of self through other people. Isolation from family, friends and society, lack of engagement with other people, can disconnect us from our inner self and lead us to lose touch with ourselves. We need the other to find ourselves, as the African notion of Ubuntu teaches us. Many homeless people resort to alcohol or drugs to be able to cope with the pain they feel. They suppress any disturbing memories and seek to be so inebriated to avoid feeling any pain. Whilst alcohol or drugs can provide temporary relief, for some period of time, it becomes ineffective as a 'pain reliever' in the long run. It can also severely deteriorate one's physical and mental health and make the mind and the body so dependent on the substance.

The state's response often tends to be geared towards serving the greatest number of people. The art of policymaking is often about finding a solution which produces the most desired outcomes. It is often practically impossible to address individual problems at the state level. Many solutions that the state provides are often a response to trends and patterns that have built up over a period of time. As organisations and citizens with an interest in ensuring favourable policies for homeless people, we feed into the debate about the adequacy of state intervention, after a pattern has developed.

This one size fits all approach can be detrimental to those who do not fit the mould. Many state-funded programmes tend to have a limited timeframe and clear intended outcomes. Continuation of funding is often dependent on fulfilling the agreed targets. The bidding process meant to determine value for money can sometimes lead organisations to commit to offering a service with unrealistic targets. They have to show that they can offer more value for money than a rival organisation. Targets are an important instrument for the purpose of accountability, after all taxpayers money has to be accounted for, and the state must make every effort to get the greatest return on it. But just like with schools, when the emphasis is on testing, not great learning, organisations may become more preoccupied with demonstrating results to remain in business than truly enabling their customers to attain more meaningful lives.

This is not to say that the vast majority of their clients do not benefit from their service, the difficulty often resides in the existing policy incompatibility with a person's particular circumstances. Unfortunately, many state-funded organisations feel unable or are unwilling to challenge official policy even when certain government policies are clearly inconsistent. For instance, the government encourages unemployed people to look for jobs wherever they are available regardless of national geographical boundaries, whilst at the same time restricting certain critical state assistance, like housing, to local residents. Access to certain services is linked to proving local connection.

Many charitable organisations who work closely with government offer society a great service and the state is right to provide certain public services through them. The quality of the programmes they run is often made better by their unique expertise and their natural commitment to serving the beneficiary community. However, the problem arises when they become reluctant to criticise government, at least publicly, because they are so much in bed with them or doing so may threaten future funding prospects, unless funding ends altogether. They thus deprive government and the wider society of their important insight into their area of expertise. They effectively become implementation agencies. They lose their character that made them so attractive in the first place.

For organisations like the Manna Society, we are not as effective as we can be in influencing national policy debate. We often focus our effort more on offering an effective service to those individuals who come to our day centre than campaigning for policy change. When we campaign, it is usually in support of other more resourced campaigning organisations. We often lack the resources and time to initiate our own policy proposals based on our experience.

We take pride in the way we operate. Not only are we able to address people's basic needs when it comes to food, clothing, health and shower facilities, we also provide them with excellent quality advice, which enables them to find housing, sort out their welfare benefits issues and deal with whatever social problems are preventing them from resettling back into the wider community. Meeting an advice-worker is like holding a mirror to oneself. Our team of three advisers help people to have a reality check on their circumstances and the prospects they have to sort themselves out. They accompany our service-users in their journey off the streets.

The London Borough of Southwark funds two posts in our advice team, one full-time and the other part-time. The third post is paid for by the Manna Society. Southwark's funding accounts for about 10% of our overall budget. Because we are not so heavily dependent on this funding, we enjoy a healthy relationship. The council is able to serve local residents through us, without restricting us to only cater for them. We have the capacity to also help those in neighbouring boroughs, the wider London or those who have just arrived from other towns and cities across the UK and Europe. It allows us to be more in tune with where people are at without worrying too much about whether they have a local connection or not. This sits very well with our ethos of treating everyone who comes to us with love, acceptance, respect and dignity and dealing with everyone at every stage of their personal struggle. Although, we may end up convincing a service-user that their best course of action is to return to the geographical area to which they are connected, because of better prospects there, this is not our starting point and should not be.

All in all, we must avoid contributing to marginalising even further homeless people from mainstream living. One size does not fit all. We all have particular circumstances that do not always fit the mould. Understandably the government's purpose in introducing a policy is often to impact on the greatest number of people, but as active citizens and organisations, we must be conscious of those who fall between the cracks and it is our job to do something about it.



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Prevention is better than cure
By
Margaret Shapland
Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



“Sometimes only one person is missing and the whole world seems depopulated.”

Alphonse de Lamartine - Poet, Writer and Statesman, 1790-1869

You will see a lot of quotes scattered through this article from both French and Arabic writers. I am writing it just after the terrible events in Paris and elsewhere (Mali) that brings to mind not just how cruel humans can be to one another but also the human tragedy of those left behind to manage their grief at their loss.

“It is by suffering that human beings become angels.”

Victor Hugo (French romantic Poet, Novelist and Dramatist, 1802-1885)

“Life doesn't stop after losing someone, but it goes on without them differently.”

Nizar Qabbani (Syrian diplomat, poet, 1923-1998)

It is also the time of year that the annual memorial service for our homeless brothers and sisters who have passed away in this year takes place. Sadly this year's roll call is longer than ever and there were 12 who had literally died on the streets. We knew of one such person. Let's call him Geoff. We had known him at the centre for a long time and he was a man who sadly suffered from an alcohol addiction and had been in and out of hostels and independent accommodation for some years. He was found propped up against a wall somewhere in the city – he was a year younger than me. It is a sad end to a life and one might say that surely this is an example of homeless services failing to solve a problem.

I think not. I recently read an article about root causes of homelessness and the impact that early interventions could make. A report by Crisis released in July this year estimated the taxpayer could save between £3,000 and £18,000 for each homeless person if they had been helped at an earlier stage in their journey. The Local Government Association also reported that every £1 spent on local welfare – helping people avoid becoming homeless – has saved the public purse more than £2. A key player in the homeless sector commented;

“The longer they remain sleeping rough, the more expensive they become. If we were to fund more preventative services [that] would be more cost-effective. We're so obsessed with when people hit the streets, but there needs to be more focus on stopping them from getting there.” Petra Selva – Director of Street Homelessness and Outreach Services; St Mungos Broadway

The report cited two scenarios which would have very different outcomes for a young person who might fall into homelessness. Let's assume for the sake of argument that she is a young woman under 25. I make no apology for quoting almost verbatim

In the first scenario:

- She is helped into immediate temporary accommodation in supported housing for four weeks.
- She then receives a low intensity floating support service during a short-term return to the parental home which enables her to make a planned move into suitable shared private rented accommodation.
- Parental relationships become positive while she is able to live independently and she secures paid work within one year.

In the second scenario:

- the local authority finds her ineligible for the homelessness duty
- She receives a list of private rented accommodation but no other assistance.
- She relies initially on sofa surfing but negative experiences from these arrangements lead to deterioration in her mental health
- She makes increasing use of homelessness services and uses drugs as a result of stress and depression
- She has a non-elective long stay in hospital as her health has deteriorated

- She is admitted into residential detoxification service for six weeks but lack of settled, suitable housing presents major challenges in trying to end her drug use

The research calculated that preventing her homelessness in the first scenario cost £1,558. By comparison this cost rose to £11,733 when her homelessness was not properly resolved as described in scenario two. This report was written in the light of the proposed changes to housing benefit entitlement for those under 25 but the scenarios above are not that uncommon for some of the clients that we see, who can be of any age when they first encounter homelessness. But also if we can “nip it in the bud” so to speak, we can really make a difference to how someone’s life evolves or being there at a crucial time in a person’s life where there is a window of opportunity to help someone and that is where service such as ours have a real part to play.

“Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.” Victor Hugo

Let me talk to you about one of our clients. Let’s call her Simone. She was a young mother and started working in clubs to support her children (she has 4). It was an exciting life and gradually she got drawn into drugs taking heroin, cocaine and others. It became hard for her to work and so life on benefits began. She started a programme of methadone replacement but that has become as critical an addiction for her as heroin was before. Her children became lost to her, living instead with her oldest daughter and in estrangement. The downward spiral continued with her losing her property and becoming reliant on her circle of acquaintances for a sofa to sleep on. When she came to see us, she had got to the point where she was staying in a house where she was being bullied by the extended family of the person in whose home she was staying. We placed her in a shelter and started to look at the various options open to her.

Simone was also a prolific shoplifter – a relic of her days when she was consuming drugs and had an outstanding court case. We found an organisation that offers a great programme for support in a shared housing environment. The initial interview did not go well as sometimes after taking her methadone, she became drowsy and could not really participate in the interview. I was told later by the worker involved that they were minded to refuse her. I asked for another chance and said that I would attend with her. We arranged with the keyworker at the shelter that we would look after Simone for the day of the interview. Her keyworker remained with her until I finished my advice session and we spoke about how she felt and we all agreed that honesty was key in this interview. We went, met with a worker at the project who tuned in well with Simone and it was a brilliant interview and so affecting to hear her speak about her struggles. The great thing was that just shortly before, Simone has reconnected with her children and been assured of their support. She has been to court and been given a Drug Rehabilitation Order rather than a custodial sentence.

The project agreed that she should come for a trial day as they offer a lot of different interventions. We are not there yet but she is a lovely woman destroyed for the moment by circumstances but she will rise again; of that I am sure. Maybe if Simone had had earlier intervention, her story might have been markedly different.

“There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior of the soul” Victor Hugo

As I finish this little piece, I give you my thanks for all you have done for us through your support over this past year, I give you my best wishes for a peaceful Christmas and a New Year full of hope and I end with two quotes; one from Albert Camus who was born in Algeria of a French family and who worked behind the scenes for Algerian prisoners facing the death penalty apart from his roles as a writer, philosopher and human rights activist, the other from Kahlil Gibran, born in Lebanon of a Maronite Christian background but who immigrated to the USA

“Peace is the only battle worth waging” Albert Camus

“I love you, my brother, whoever you are - whether you worship in a church, kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque. You and I are children of one faith, for the diverse paths of religion are fingers of the loving hand of the one Supreme Being, a hand extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all, eager to receive all.”

Kahlil Gibran

ALGAE – Mental Health First Aid

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Some time ago I had an opportunity to attend free training on Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and I would like to share some things that I learnt with you. MHFA is an internationally recognized programme, conceived in 2000 in Australia and it focuses on increasing the mental health literacy of the population. It teaches people: to recognize symptoms of mental health problem, to provide initial help and to guide a person towards more appropriate professional help.

I found the training exceptionally informative and beneficial for my work. Moreover, in my opinion everybody needs a basic knowledge about mental health problems as they are very common. According to statistics, 1 in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year. Despite The World Health Organisation stressing that the approach to mental ill health should be fundamentally the same as to physical ill health, there is a stigma associated to mental health problems and it hinders people from seeking help. Sufferers are often ashamed to discuss their mental health problems while those around don't know how to respond. Most of us are familiar with first aid ABC model (airways, breathing, circulation), that describes the essential steps; the first aider has to take to when dealing with a patient. But many have not a clue how to help someone who is suffering from a mental health crisis. The ALGAE model has been created to help us to deal with mental health problems.

Here what it stands for:

A - assess risk of suicide or self-harm, **L** - listen non-judgmentally, **G** - give reassurance and information, **E** - encourage the person to get appropriate professional help, **E** - encourage self-help strategies

Let me briefly explain all 5 steps in relation to depression. More information can be found on www.mhfaengland.org.

A - A person can feel so overwhelmed and helpless that the future appears hopeless. They may think suicide is the only solution. To assess the risk of suicide or self-harm we should try to engage the person in a serious conversation and try to find out: are they thinking about suicide, have they made any preparations, have they attempted suicide before, do they have personal support etc. If we believe the person is at risk of harming themselves, we should seek professional help immediately (e.g. 999, A&E, NHS Direct, Samaritans helpline).

L - Listen to the person without judging them as weak. People in depression cannot choose how they feel and their problems are not due to weakness or laziness. We all tend to give advice such as 'pull yourself together' or 'cheer up' when faced with someone in crisis while it would be more helpful to just listen and let the other person talk freely about their problems. Be patient and do not express frustration with the person for having such symptoms.

G - Reassure the person and help them understand that what they experience, is not their weakness or character defect, but a real medical condition, that can be treated. Depression is a common problem and various treatments are available.

E - Encourage the person to get help. That can be visiting a GP or a counsellor, calling the Samaritans helpline or getting support from a voluntary organisation like Mind etc. Help them to link with them if possible.

E - Many people experiencing mental health problems can help themselves. Support them in accessing good-quality courses, books, support groups etc.

That is a very brief explanation of ALGEE and, some of its steps will need to be tailored to the experienced symptoms, personality and situation. What I like about it is that it is simple and gives me some sort of structure for assisting people in emotional distress.

Be WELL this Christmas: care, be active, keep learning, give, connect, take notice!

First impressions

By

Louisa Toland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



In my first few weeks working in the Manna what has blown me away more than anything else, is how much people are accepted and held, with love and compassion. There is respect, humility and dignity that exists, it is not handed out, it is real and tangible. This expression co-exists between the service users, they have it for each other, and it is there between staff and service users, volunteers and service users, staff and volunteers.

Some of the differences that people have, that might otherwise be frowned upon, feared, pushed away or at best just about tolerated are accepted here. People, who are excluded on a grand scale in every sense of the word, are welcomed.

When people, all people are shown humanity they respond with humanity, all the differences melt into each other, folk naturally express themselves freely because it is safe to do so, and in a way peoples' difference are enjoyed and celebrated. The opposite of fear is love. This is not a complicated recipe for life, yet it is not always practiced so frequently, in organisations and institutions, even though they are dealing with people.

I see people's spirits relaxing and sometimes shining despite the reality of their situation, living on the street, no recourse to public funds, no close community or family, whatever the issues, survival at the most basic of levels. Humour and good fun is a universal language (more than football I'd say) and I have experienced this in abundance in the centre. We have to laugh all of us, otherwise there can only be tears.

The Manna Centre is a unique place and it is no coincidence both staff and volunteers, and some service users have remained throughout. There is a richness of love, compassion and understanding in accepting everyone which is wonderful to witness. It is easy to harden our hearts and close the doors when things become tough, most States of the US and many countries in Europe are examples of exactly that, in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks of last Friday the 13th of November, as they close the doors to Syrian refugees.

As the first snow of the winter falls on London town, the Manna Centres doors are firmly open.

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Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2015

It costs approx. **£40,000 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate Christian response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.



Would you like to support the work of the Manna Centre by making a one-off donation (either by cheque or online via our website

or

by texting MANN22 [plus the amount] to 70070)

or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form?

If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 25% to your donation, at no extra expense to yourself, you can do so by simply Gift-Aiding your donation.

Perhaps you would consider leaving us a legacy in your will?

However you choose to support our work we are indeed most grateful.

May God bless you in this holy season & throughout the coming year.

I would like to donate £_____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society")

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If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ____ and sign below.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

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To the Manager of _____ Bank/Building Society

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The sum of £_____ (amount in words: _____)

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If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ____ and sign below.

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