

Immersion Paper

Sandra Gutierrez

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Nyack College

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Dr. A'tasha M. Christian

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Introduction

Homelessness is a national issue; however, New York City (NYC) has one of the highest rates in the country (Coalition For The Homeless, 2022), affecting individuals in various communities. The crisis is more apparent in the subways, and it appears that homelessness is more evident in certain areas. As of March 2022, there were about 48,000 individuals experiencing homelessness, 10,091 families, and 15,087 children (Coalition For The Homeless, 2022). Volunteering at The Bowery Mission and New Alternative, which have focused their efforts on assisting the homeless, has helped me to see the issues firsthand and view statistics as individuals with intimate stories of real-life circumstances.

Organizations

The Bowery Mission

The Bowery Mission was established in the 1870s in the neighborhood of Bowery, Manhattan. To address the widespread issue of homelessness, New York City Rescue Mission, located in Tribeca, and Goodwill Rescue Mission in Newark, NJ, recently joined The Bowery Mission's charge to strengthen their efforts against homelessness in more neighborhoods (The Bowery Mission, n.d.). Every week, hundreds of volunteers register for two or three-hour shifts in the kitchen: prepping, serving in the dining hall, or providing clothes for thousands of homeless guests at their three locations.

Previously known as New York City Rescue Mission, the Tribeca location is one of the few emergency housing facilities in NYC, serving the community since 1872. It has six floors, housing 124 beds, currently serving about 80 men and 30 women (J. Soriano, personal communication, June 26, 2022). It is open to the public, and some individuals are referred by community clinics, hospitals, and social workers. Every afternoon starting at 4:00 pm,

individuals begin to line up to get a bed for the night. The following day, individuals given a bed would meet with Jackie Soriano [social worker] to discuss their needs (R.Tieu, personal communication, July 14, 2022). Guests can stay up to seven days. However, some stay longer than a month, sometimes up to a year (R. Tieu, personal communication, July 14, 2022). During my visit, I was one of six volunteers; three were students from Duke University interning in NYC for the summer, a regular volunteer, and Larry, an oncologist working at NYU Langone Hospital. That evening we served dinner to 112 individuals currently living in the facility.

The original building in the neighborhood of Bowery serves the homeless from neighboring communities across NYC's five boroughs. This facility has a dining hall serving three meals daily: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Additionally, it houses five showers in the basement that can only be used daily by 20 individuals. Men start lining up at 6:00 am since there are a limited number of tickets; the women can only shower once a week on Mondays. Furthermore, it has a clothing room that stores undergarments, socks, pants, jackets, sweaters, suitcases, and blankets (D. Masson, personal communication, June 27, 2022). Lastly, they offer training programs for 20 guests in their long-term residential program in Harlem, Manhattan. The training program includes substance abuse counseling, resume building, and career training (R. Tieu, personal communication, July 14, 2022).

New Alternatives

New Alternatives was founded in 2008 by Kate Barnhart to assist LGBTQ+ young adults between the ages of 16-30 years old (New Alternatives, n.d.). They offer long-term support to individuals to avoid the shelter system and obtain a stable way of living. It also provides weekly Sunday community dinners, life skill training, clothing, weekly case management led by a social worker, and HIV testing (New Alternatives, n.d.). Volunteers have two hours to prepare a meal

for 30 individuals. During my visit, I was one of four other individuals, including an editor named Jamie, a professional chef named Michael, a first-time volunteer named Dwayne, and Matilde, my classmate. My time here was minimal compared to The Bowery Mission due to fewer volunteering opportunities.

Things I Learned

Before this assignment, I was ignorant of the factors that steer homelessness in NYC. However, volunteer coordinator Raymond Tieu affirms that individuals who come to The Bowery Mission are primarily middle-aged men and women who struggle with substance abuse, drugs, eviction, and mental health issues (R. Tieu, personal communication, July 14, 2022). Further research indicates that other reasons for homelessness are “rising costs of living, lack of jobs, overcrowding living, and immigration status” (Coalition of the Homeless, 2022, Para. 6). Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth represents 40% of the homeless youth population (New Alternatives, n.d.). It is more plausible that they undergo “bullying, sexual assault, violence, trauma, HIV infection, mental health disorders and substance abuse than their heterosexual peers” (New Alternatives, n.d., Para. 1).

Feelings

Approaching this assignment, I mixed feelings of nervousness, fear, and excitement. I was excited to help those less fortunate at the Bowery Mission and relieved that I was initially unable to get a volunteer opportunity with the LGBTQ+ community. However, to my surprise, there was an opening to serve at New Alternatives, focusing on homelessness within the LGBTQ+ community. I felt nervous that I would judge the LGBTQ youth for their circumstances. At the same time, I was afraid I would offend someone with my presence alone if

they knew I was a Christian. Additionally, I was worried I would not know how to act in this environment.

New Alternatives

Of the five volunteers, Matilde and I were the only cisgender women on the team. Immediately, I felt like an outlier; I realized that the roles had been reversed, and I had become the minority within this group. We had two hours to complete dinner preparations, and I was partnered with Jamie. As we began chatting, I sensed our guards were up because we had two different sexual orientation perspectives. She appeared surprised I was a cisgender woman as I kept referring to my husband in our conversation. I began to wonder if only LGBTQ+ individuals volunteered at these dinners. She seemed uncomfortable navigating our conversation and shy about using the term ‘partner’ when referring to her significant other. However, we stayed amicable throughout our interactions.

The Bowery Mission

Conversely, although it is a Christian organization, none of the volunteers were Christian. Therefore, I felt they could not relate to how I was relating to the subtle Christian songs that played in the background or the Christian verses on the walls. Even though we were working as a team focused on one mission – feeding the hungry, I felt alone. I wondered why I was the only Christian assisting at these dinners; I assumed there would be at least another Christian on our team. However, that was not the case, and that loneliness made me sad about the experience even more.

Engagement

Although each organization was different, they both restricted volunteers from personally interacting with the individuals we were serving. However, at The Bowery Mission, while

serving dinner, I interacted with some of the guests by saying, 'Hello.' In turn, they appreciated us helping out with dinner before going upstairs. After dinner, I briefly interacted with a Spanish-speaking man who felt comfortable sharing that he had just arrived in NYC from Venezuela; the journey had taken him two months.

Similarly, at New Alternatives, I briefly interacted with a quiet transgender person who sat all by themselves at the back of the room; it seemed they had no friends. They were courteous every time I handed them food and variations of dessert. However, there were differences between the two communities' atmospheres. To my surprise, the LGBTQ+ youth acted more entitled and less polite than the homeless individuals at The Bowery Mission. Perhaps, it could be an age difference since this generation seems more entitled.

Cultural Identity

Immersing myself in these two communities has impacted my self-identity. It thus has contributed to a better understanding of myself, embracing the development of my professional identity as a counselor. This experience has challenged my cultural identity as I encountered the realities of the homeless and LGBTQ+ communities. However, my exposure highlighted the stereotypes and biases regarding these two communities. I have become aware of the effect cultural identity has as a motivator or roadblock to my personal growth as an individual and as a professional.

My faith was the source of my reactions to these two experiences. On the one hand, I felt I was doing the Lord's work by helping those less fortunate at The Bowery Mission. Contrarily, I felt troubled when helping the youth at New Alternatives. My current social-economic status hindered me from sympathizing with the circumstances of many of those in the homeless shelter. However, I was able to connect with some of the individuals in these two communities as they

were Latinos who probably experienced some of the issues I have faced as a Latina: discrimination, overcrowding living situations, and job opportunities. As a counseling student, I question if my cultural identity reflects the person I need to be going forward?

Power and Privilege

This experience exposed the complex issues in NYC and how it impacts specific communities within the five boroughs. I understood the need versus the reality of the available resources for these two communities. In retrospect, although my family did not have much, I still had a sheltered life. I was raised in a safe neighborhood and protected from experiencing the reality of homelessness because even though we lived in an overcrowded apartment, we still had a place to call home.

While volunteering at The Bowery Mission, I realized volunteers' impact on non-profit organizations' work. It made me more self-aware of my privilege and the many blessings I have had despite my difficult circumstances. I took for granted the smallest of things, like taking a shower, having clean undergarments, socks, shoes, and clean clothes, the ability to buy food I crave, and a place to call home where I can leave my things instead of having them in a backpack or suitcases. Although I had a great time working with David, an ambassador to the homeless, the reality is that most individuals cannot change their clothes regularly. Likewise, at New Alternatives, I experienced the power I have in my community as a cisgender woman, able to work and not be judged or criticized by society.

After Volunteering

I realized the daily hard work these non-profit and community-based organizations must do to assist these communities with basic needs. This experience has helped me build a sense of appreciation for all the things that make us different: cultural background, language, and race. I

will continue volunteering at the Bowery Mission to learn more about homelessness and how to advocate for them because, with time, they become known individuals.

I felt victorious at the New Alternative dinner as I overcame my fear of mingling with LGBTQ+ individuals. I built a stronger appreciation for cultural differences because of my experience. I continue to realize we are strongly influenced by our family moral values and religious beliefs, class status, and cultural and social expectations, which make me see society through a specific lens. My naivety about these communities has encouraged me to continue to volunteer and advocate for their basic needs because sometimes it is not the individual that needs to change but aspects of the community at large.

Perceived Notions

Homeless individuals living on the subways or the streets of NYC seem to suffer from mental health issues, including delusions and paranoia. I have perceived them as drug addicts, dirty and smelly. These perceptions have become the stereotypes of all homeless individuals. However, there are other reasons individuals become homeless. For example, Raymond Tieu shared that an individual asking for help became homeless because he was in a legal battle, was asked to leave his home, and was referred to The Bowery Mission by the court.

Additionally, I have made many assumptions about the LGBTQ community, such as gay men have HIV, lesbians were sexually molested, and therefore hate men. Furthermore, gay men are flamboyant, and all LGBTQ+ individuals are confused about their sexual identity; consequently, it must be a phase. However, my skewed perception of the homeless community has dramatically shifted due to my experiences and my interactions with volunteers and staff assisting these communities daily. Specifically, I felt compassion for the LGBTQ+ young adults. They seem to be happy for that moment but I sensed their need to find acceptance and stability.

Conclusion

Volunteering at The Bowery Mission and New Alternative has shown me that homelessness does not discriminate against gender, age, and ethnicity. Each individual has a distinctive journey to homelessness, not solely due to mental health issues. The lack of knowledge of their unique stories hinders the ability to assist those that come through counseling offices/centers. Therefore, the homeless community would be significantly impacted without the help of community-based centers and non-profit organizations.

It was an excellent opportunity to experience and learn about their struggles instead of just reading them from a textbook. Therefore, these short-time experiences will prepare me to counsel diverse populations and learn more about cultural differences and how those differences impact the lives of those individuals daily.

References

The Bowery Mission. (n.d.). *About us*. Donate, Volunteer or Learn More to Help the Homeless & Hungry | The Bowery Mission. <https://www.bowery.org/about-us/>

Coalition For The Homeless. (2022, May). *Facts about homelessness*. Retrieved July 12, 2022, from <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>