

Advocacy and Homelessness: How **YOU** Can Create Change

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**THE
LORD'S
PLACE**
*Breaking the Cycle
of Homelessness*

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ADVOCACY AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness – The Basics

In Palm Beach County, there over 1,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night. Research shows these families and individuals are at increased risk of physical and mental harm, poor health, food insecurity, and other challenges.

YOU can create change through advocacy

Advocacy is simply the act of supporting a cause through writing, speech, or organizing in a group to effect the necessary changes in systems that are unequitable and unjust.

The Lord’s Place, a not-for-profit, homeless service provider in Palm Beach County, has served the needs of our community during the last 40 years. Over time, The Lord’s Place has grown and adapted to meet the current needs of our homeless neighbors, including building a department for the sole purpose of advocacy. We are dedicated and committed to our mission – breaking the cycle of homelessness by providing innovative, compassionate, and effective services for men, women, and children in Palm Beach County.

Advocacy is an essential component to ending homelessness. In addition to the delivery of services provided by our homeless service programs, advocacy addresses the systems and policies that keep barriers in place. It is also a means of educating those that make, review, and change polices.



Local, state, and federal changes to policy and/or legislation can make great impact in our homeless community. From affordable housing and housing voucher programs to funding for homeless services and homeless prevention programs, it is through educating and advocating that change will occur.

It is the intention of this Toolkit to provide **YOU** a basic overview of homelessness and the way that advocacy can create change in communities facing homelessness. It is our hope that this toolkit will serve as a foundation for improving the lives of those struggling with homelessness and poverty in our community and yours.

The Power of Education

Preventing and ending homelessness starts with education. It is important that community members know where and how to access help, and that policymakers know the facts to ensure equitable and impactful legislation.

In order to propose, support, and at times even oppose legislation that impacts our homeless community, policymakers need the necessary information to make informed and educated decisions. Providing up-to-date statistics and facts highlighting the successes and challenges that face our community will allow legislators to fully understand the issues that impact their constituents.

Talking points and **fact sheets** are an important component to help your advocating efforts. Data illustrates the context of national, state, and local urgency impacting homelessness, and the further impact that particular programs can and do have on outcomes. Contact The Lord's Place and other agencies to gather information and talking points.

***Insider Tip:** It is helpful to include, **and bold**, your top 3-5 priorities or bills to oppose or support in your talking points. Highlighting the impact of bills or issues you are presenting is also beneficial to our policy makers.*

Most elected officials do not know the barriers and issues that the homeless community experience; through comprehensive educational initiatives we can provide the necessary information for our policymakers to make well informed decisions.

Additionally, **sharing specific stories and experiences** can add a compelling dimension when presenting issues to your policymakers. By blending of statistics, data, and personal stories **YOU** can paint a relevant and complete picture that can succinctly depict a specific need, and likewise influence your elected official.

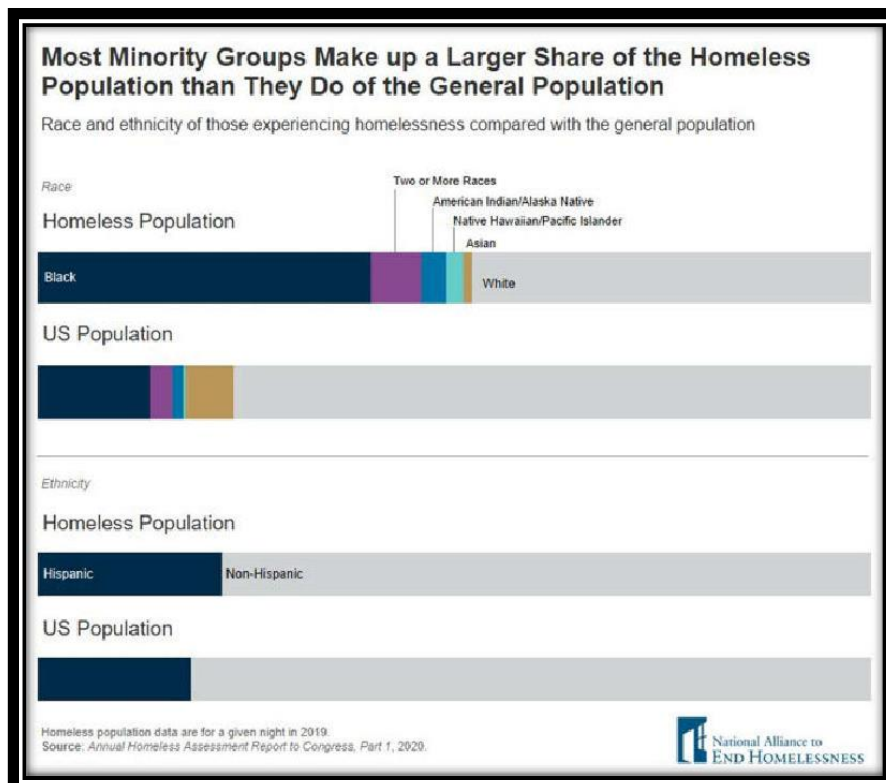
Through advocacy, you can also energize others in your community to get involved! Sharing information and advocacy efforts can lead to a more unified approach, which will in turn create greater opportunity for change.

Creating educational materials can help to clarify the issues and outline solutions.

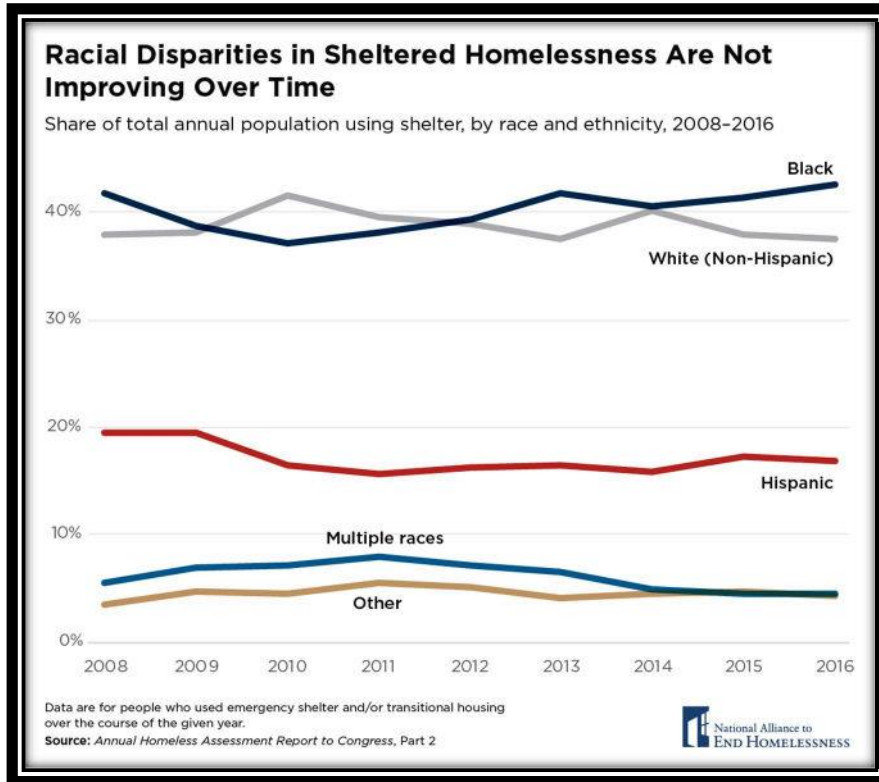
- ✓ **Talking Points with Data and Statistics**
- ✓ **A One-Page Summary of the Needs and Solutions**
- ✓ **Share Experiences and Stories – Make it Personal**

Homelessness and Racial Equity

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), “most minority groups in the United States experience homelessness at much higher rates than Whites, and therefore make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population” (NAEH, 2020). The NAEH also found that African Americans make up 13% of our general population, yet they represent “more than 40%” of the homeless population. Likewise, other minority groups and those who identify as two or more races, are also disproportionately represented in the homeless community.



Furthermore, according to this data, these disproportionate trends are not improving over time. The NAEH has found that African Americans are still the largest group to access shelter; this number has steadily grown while the number of White, Non-Hispanic individuals has decreased over time.



Educating and advocating for change is essential if we are to end homelessness in our communities. Systems and policies that have created a range of issues stemming from racial inequity in our homeless communities must be continuously examined and challenged if we are to create lasting change.

How to Create Change

The Basics of Advocacy

Advocacy is the simple act of supporting a cause to effect the necessary changes you would like to see in your community. Often times, when working with homeless clients, you may encounter barriers that hinder people from easily breaking free of homelessness – perhaps it is an inability to navigate complex systems, qualify for services, or find affordable housing. When these barriers are recognized and highlighted, advocating for change is the first step to breaking down these barriers.

Once barriers are identified, education is the next step to change. As mentioned earlier, educating lawmakers, stakeholders, community members, and clients provides an opportunity to highlight concerns that might otherwise go unnoticed. Policymakers may be unaware of the barriers that our homeless community face, and providing education may be just what they need to change the policies that are unjust or inequitable.

“A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Sharing personal, heartfelt experiences can paint a picture that your legislator may never have considered before. The impact of your stories can carry immense weight, and when coupled with statistics, data, and reporting, the impact can be quite compelling. Such stories can effectively establish the need for policy change.

Advocacy is taking **YOUR** experiences, highlighting a need for change, and building the relationships to find universal solutions to our most pressing problems.

The Art of Showing Up

Just as in any good relationship, it is important for advocates to show up. Building relationships with your policymakers and community leaders is essential. We can show up in a variety of ways: Taking the form of letter writing, calling elected officials, meeting with policymakers, hosting a site visit, and working with your community to organize and mobilize initiatives are all effective ways to show up.

Know who your elected officials are.

YOU can easily find your Florida State and Congressional Leaders:

<https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/myrepresentative.aspx>

Correspondence

Emailing and calling your elected officials is something that can be easily done and can be quite impactful, especially if many people write or call in together. Organizing a group for a particular issue or event can elevate the influence of a letter or phone call immensely.

Here are a few steps to consider:

- ✓ When emailing or calling, creating a script or talking points around your homelessness issue or piece of legislation that will clarify your message and keep you “on point.”
- ✓ Have your “ask” in mind. Be mindful of your position on an issue and clearly present your “ask” – the action that you want your elected official to take.
- ✓ When calling a legislator’s office, it is a good idea to ask to speak with the staff person most closely related to your issue. It is also okay to leave a voicemail summarizing your points and ask. You can also call back to follow up!
- ✓ Don’t be afraid to follow up via phone or email, especially after 48 hours after contact.
- ✓ Thank your elected official for their efforts that champion your cause or issue.



How to Engage with Policymakers

Engagement and advocacy is a year round practice. While the excitement of political process is front and center while various legislators are in session, there is much to do while elected officials are back in their districts.

Legislators often hold public meetings that allow them to showcase where they stand on current issues and the work that they have done. Visiting elected officials in their district offices also allows for a personal connection at “home.” It is a good idea call your elected official’s office and ask when their next public meeting will take place, and ask to be placed on their email list for future updates.

Mobilizing groups to attend public meetings can be quite impactful. Many constituents voicing their concerns about homelessness during an organized meeting can show elected officials that there are many in community that are passionate about the issue.

In addition to showing up at public meetings, be prepared with statistics, data, and clear questions for your policymakers. Engaging with lawmakers in educated, compassionate ways is a sure way to convey **YOUR** message.

Here are a few tips when attending public meetings:

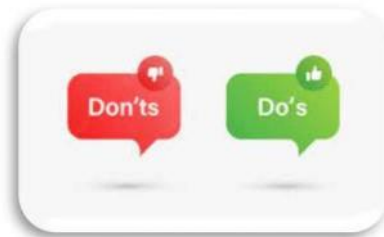
- ✓ Prepare for the meeting with statistics, data, questions, and clear messaging.
- ✓ Gather a group.
- ✓ Show up early with your group to organize messaging and questions. (Who will ask what?)
- ✓ Walk in separately to public meetings and spread out in room.
- ✓ Show how homelessness affects your community.
- ✓ Offer solutions.
- ✓ Publicize the meeting in local groups and social media.
- ✓ Hold policymakers accountable with noting their responses.

Remember, **hosting a site visit** is another great idea!

While elected officials are at home, this opens another opportunity to invite them for a site visit. Site visits allow your policymakers to engage directly with the people that their decisions will affect, while showing them exactly what you do!

This is another great opportunity to connect the dots, providing local and national contexts for the work that you do, and how it affects constituents. This is also a good time to showcase federally funded programs that work or the gaps that are found.

Here are a few helpful Do's and Don'ts when communicating with your legislator:



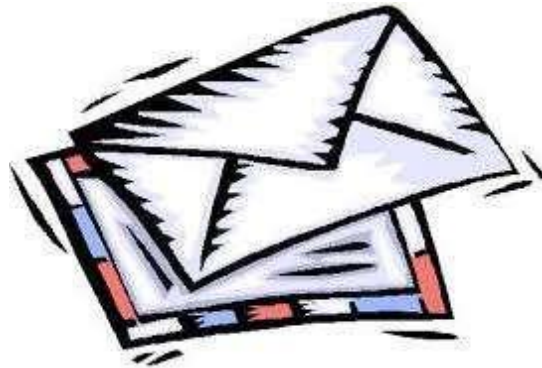
- ✓ Do know your audience – Know what they stand for and what they have voted on. Know what committees they sit on and special interests they may have.
- ✓ Do tailor your message to your legislator's priorities.
- ✓ Do explain the work you do.
- ✓ Do act and look professional.
- ✓ Do take photos!
- ✓ Do be positive and solution focused.
- ✓ Do say thank you and follow up.

- ❖ Don't discuss an issue that you are unfamiliar with.
- ❖ Don't dismiss congressional staff – they are important!
- ❖ Don't monopolize, patronize, or complain.

How to Write an Effective Letter

Advocacy can take many forms – emails, phone calls, rallies, petitions, public meeting events, and of course, the letter. Letter writing can be a very effective way to communicate with your elected officials. Here are a few points to ensure that **YOUR** letter is a valuable asset to your advocacy efforts:

- ✓ State your name, agency, and district.
- ✓ Be clear and succinct, expressing your concern.
- ✓ Provide statistics, data, and personal stories to support your solution.
- ✓ Clearly ask for what you want your legislators to do.
- ✓ Thank your legislator for their time and consideration.



SAMPLE LETTER

Date

The Honorable (State or Congressional Representative/ Senator Name)
(Office Address of the Representative/ Senator)

Dear Representative/ Congressman/woman/ Senator (Last Name),

Paragraph one – Introduce yourself and the organization you work for, and state your relationship to the legislator. Clearly state the issue you are supporting or

Paragraph two – Provide statistics and add your personal story here. Be sure you are providing the facts and you are providing justification for your position.

Paragraph three – Include your “ask” here – remember to be specific and get right to the point. Ask for a response as well.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and support.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)

(Your Title)

(Your Address)

(Your City, State, Zip Code)

(Your Email)

(Your Phone Number)

Do Your Homework

It cannot be understated how valuable homework is. Before advocating know your issue; know what has worked and what has not. Be sure to gather statistics, data, and personal stories to support your stance. Researching your issue, the policies, and the lawmakers that impact those policies will set you up for successful advocacy!

YOU can make change happen.

With the help of this guidance and partnering with other groups, like The Lord's Place, **YOU** can make a difference!



Resources

Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH)

National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC)

US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)