

## UPF New York, USA: UN Social Development Commission - Affordable Housing

Lynn Walsh  
February 13, 2020



New York, United States -- The theme for this year's UN Commission on Social Development (CSoD) was "Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness." A CSoD side event titled "Family Homelessness: Prevention and Solutions" was held on February 13, 2020, at the UN Headquarters. Partners organizing the event were the Division for Inclusive Social Development section of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DISD/DESA), UNANIMA International, the International Federation for Family Development, UN Women and the NGO Committee on the Family.

Ms. Daniela Bas, director of DISD/DESA, moderated the panel. Professor Bahira Trask, chair of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Delaware, spoke on the topic "Families and Affordable Housing." She described the current worldwide situation of substandard housing and homelessness of families as a crisis. Prof. Trask stated that the lack of affordable or adequate housing leads to multifaceted suffering and disadvantages for families such as instability, lack of security, adequate income, nutrition, health care and education, as well as delayed child development. Prof. Trask pointed out that all of these disadvantages ricochet with each other, making it hard for families to lift themselves out of homelessness and overcome cyclical impediments to social mobility. She suggested several policies that could facilitate the creation of more affordable housing and families' economic success.

Ms. Shanegua Holiday, senior director of Safe Horizon, stated that her agency, the largest nonprofit victim services agency in the United States, "provides support, prevents violence, promotes justice of crime and abuse, and moves victims of violence from crisis to confidence." She stated that homelessness substantially increases the risks of sex trafficking and sexual assault. Ms. Holiday described their programs that facilitate women's gaining numerous skills and empowerment so that they can heal from abuse, find housing, and move on in their lives. Ms. Molly Gerke, Executive Assistant to UNANIMA International, described the work of her organization to administer research and to advocate at the UN for women and children, displaced or homeless people, refugees, and migrants. She pointed out that women and children, especially girls, suffer disproportionately from homelessness. Ms. Gerke stated, notably, that "families are considered to be the key to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness."

Mr. Luiz Alvaro Salles Aguiar de Menezes, secretary of International Affairs for the municipality of Sao Paulo, Brazil, reported that "São Paulo has 3.3 million people living in inadequate conditions, inhabiting 1,800 slums with 24,000 homeless" due to rapid urbanization. He reported that the government of São Paulo created the program "Familia en Foco" (Family in Focus) to address basic housing needs and provide food, medical care and professional training. Mr. Aguiar said that São Paulo understands that the family should be assisted because "it is the family where culture, education, and values are passed on." He provided many examples of local programs that effectively reduce and prevent homelessness such as by building new housing for the homeless.

Mr. Matthew Windrum, director of Government Affairs of the Doe Fund in New York City, stated that his organization's mission is to break the cycles of homelessness, addiction, and criminal recidivism by

providing holistic services, housing, and work opportunities. He conveyed that part of the problem of homelessness in the United States is over incarceration. The rate of incarceration in the United States is five to ten times higher than that of other Western countries, and incarceration increases the likelihood of homelessness ten times. Since 1990, the Doe Fund has helped over 23,000 homeless and formerly incarcerated men build productive lives through job training and support or for the mentally disabled.



Mr. Windrum remarked that for those men in the job-training program, child-support payments are mandated because improving family ties and responsibilities turns out to be an important motivational factor in the program's success. He made the important point that family disintegration, particularly the absence of responsible husbands and fathers, dramatically increases the risk of poverty and dysfunction for men, women, and children and therefore of homelessness. He said that supporting the re-entry of prisoners, especially fathers, into society after they have gained personal stability, employability, and a keener sense of family responsibility, greatly reduces future homelessness and prison recidivism. This family-focused capacity strengthening of disadvantaged males is critical for preventing the homelessness of women and children and for interrupting the cyclical pattern of multiple disadvantages resulting from family breakdown. He explained that in many ways "these men have been failed by society, but, given tools and vocational training, they gain the dignity of work, which allows them to do what we all want to do: that is, be good fathers to our children, sons to our mothers, and be in a family."

It is notable that although all of the programs -- advocacy, interventions, job training, and building of housing -- are commendable and important for lifting people out of homelessness, the issue of family capital, or the ability to provide and care for each other when facing mental illness, joblessness or tragedies (as several speakers mentioned), should not be side-stepped. The solution to homelessness is multi-faceted. Nevertheless, well-formed, cohesive families can provide resources and preventive measures that none of these interventions can equally produce.

Although some homeless individuals have loving families who make tireless efforts to help, for the most part homeless people have experienced some level of family dysfunction or disintegration. Research repeatedly indicates that weak families put all members, no matter at what stage in life, at higher risk. All human beings need love and concern from a few people committed to their welfare. In addition, human beings often become their "better selves" when they identify with, care, provide, and even sacrifice for others with whom they share unique and secure bonds. As this program has initiated, let do more to prize and protect these fragile and precious family bonds as we combat homelessness. The unique "protection system" of the family is a pivotal factor for any sustainable solution to homelessness.