

## The *Second* Student-Run Homeless Shelter<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

From 1983–2011, the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter (HSHS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the only student-run homeless shelter in the United States. However, college students at Villanova, Temple, Drexel, the University of Pennsylvania, and Swarthmore drew upon the HSHS model to open their own student-run homeless shelter in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in January 2012. This article describes the process by which the Student-Run Emergency Housing Unit of Philadelphia opened its doors, as well as the successes and challenges encountered in its first year of operation. The feasibility of this student-run model expanding to other American cities is also considered.

The most meaningful experience of my own undergraduate years was working at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter (HSHS)—a small homeless shelter located in the basement of a church in Harvard Square, which is managed and operated entirely by undergraduate volunteers from Harvard University as well as Tufts, Boston University, Wellesley, and MIT. The shelter is open seven nights a week from November through April and offers two hot meals, a bed, and support to 30 men and women in need of shelter. Volunteering at the HSHS deepened my sense of social responsibility, opened my eyes to the structural causes of poverty, and offered me the sense of purpose that accompanies engagement in meaningful work. In 2010—more than a decade removed from my own undergraduate years—I wrote a book entitled *Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless* (2010). The book focused on the current crop of college students and homeless men and women interacting each evening at the HSHS and drew upon more than 75 qualitative interviews to demonstrate the transformative effects that the two groups had upon one another.

### The Story of the Student-Run Emergency Housing Unit of Philadelphia

In January 2011, Stephanie Sena—a history professor at Villanova University in Philadelphia—happened to come across the book at the same time she was grading the final exams from her fall semester course

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on human rights violations in modern history. One of the questions on the exam had asked students to address a problem in the world and how to solve it, and some students focused their responses on the issue of homelessness. Sena began to contemplate the feasibility of replicating the student-run homeless shelter featured in *Shelter* (Seider, 2010) in the city of Philadelphia—a city with a sizable student population and homeless population of its own.

When Villanova students returned to campus this past January for the spring semester, many of Professor Sena's former students found an e-mail in their in-boxes inviting them (and any interested friends) to an informational meeting about starting up a student-run homeless shelter of their own. According to Sena, "I imagined there would be maybe 30 people in attendance at the meeting, and about 150 students ended up showing up. So the response was much more enthusiastic than I'd imagined."

Over the next several months, Sena and a core group of student leaders began to take the necessary steps to bring the student-run homeless shelter model to Philadelphia. Villanova students journeyed up to Cambridge over their spring break to volunteer at the HSHS and learn from that shelter's student leaders. Students held fundraisers on their own campus and began soliciting the involvement of college students at the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Drexel University, and Swarthmore. Meanwhile, Professor Sena began the process of applying for nonprofit status, purchasing an insurance policy, and meeting with local clergy about the possibility of locating the shelter in one of their churches. Sena and her students began referring to this project to start a student-run homeless shelter in Philadelphia as SREHUP—Student-Run Emergency Housing Unit of Philadelphia.

Much to their credit, several local churches stepped forward to answer SREHUP's call. One of these churches was the Arch Street United Methodist Church. Arch Street Church offered Sena and her students space for their shelter in a manner akin to the HSHS—seven nights a week from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. for the dangerous winter months in which homeless men and women in Philadelphia risk freezing to death if they do not come inside. Supporting the college students in starting up a homeless shelter at Arch Street Church was Project H.O.M.E., an existing nonprofit organization in Philadelphia with a team of social workers who help men and women living on the street to find both short- and long-term housing. (The acronym H.O.M.E. stands for housing, opportunities for employment, medical care, and education.) Project H.O.M.E. assumed responsibility for connecting the students running the Arch Street Shelter with homeless men and women in need of short-term housing.

This collaboration with Project H.O.M.E., one of several collaborations between SREHUP and local nonprofit organizations, represented a different approach to serving the homeless than that taken by the HSHS, in part because the HSHS had been founded in 1983, when there were virtually no existing organizations to support the homeless. In contrast, SREHUP recognized that there were numerous not-for-profit organizations from whose expertise they could benefit. Villanova sophomore and student leader Erin Weaver noted the following:

Without our partnerships there's no way we would have been as successful as we were. And I don't think any school starting out would be able to succeed without a partner providing the expertise in the field of homelessness that we don't have.

SREHUP's student-run homeless shelter at Arch Street United Methodist Church opened for business on the evening of January 2, 2012, and offered shelter to several dozen homeless men seven nights a week through the end of April.

Reflecting on her experience this past winter, Erin Weaver shared these thoughts:

What I love about going to the shelter is that I always go to dinner, and it's like an hour where you get to sit down and talk to people. We talk about my classes and school, or there was one guy we would always talk about how his recovery was going. Things like that. So it's always different, and I made some real friends.

Another of SREHUP's student leaders was Marc Witcher, a graduate student at Drexel University. Witcher explained, "I'd never volunteered for anything before, and I'd always wanted to try it." He described the experience of operating the Arch Street Shelter as simultaneously highly stressful and highly meaningful. In his words, "I've never felt that way about anything before. It was very stressful, and I was always complaining about it, but would I do it [all over] again? Yeah, I would do it again." Finally, Professor Sena explained that one of the most exciting dimensions of the student-run shelter from her vantage point was watching her students come to see the need for not only service but also advocacy on behalf of the homeless men and women they were serving. According to Sena,

[The students involved in SREHUP] have seen that their work is important, but that it's not good enough, no matter how much they do. Sleeping on a mat on a church floor is not good enough for people who are now our family. So it becomes personal to them, and they become motivated to work for change and figure out what are these issues.

Sena noted that SREHUP student leaders have met with state legislators to share their newfound perspectives on homelessness and also attended the Clinton Global Initiative University Conference in Washington, DC, to share their views on homelessness and housing and to learn more about working for social justice.

### **Challenges to Solve**

Far from resting on their laurels during the spring and summer months, Weaver, Witcher, Sena, and the rest of the SREHUP student leadership team are already thinking hard about what they need to do this coming winter to better serve the men and women staying at the SREHUP shelter. Both Weaver and Witcher explained that SREHUP's biggest challenge this past winter was keeping the shelter staffed with volunteers night after night for the entire winter. According to Weaver,

There were so many students on the first night [the shelter opened], and then for the next two weeks we really struggled just to have one person on every shift. We were shocked to find that we were not staffing the shifts nearly as well [as we'd thought we would].

Unlike the HSHS—which requires volunteers to commit to a weekly shift for the entire winter—SREHUP had simply asked students to volunteer for as many or as few shifts as they were able. As a result, there were dramatic fluctuations in the number of volunteers at the shelter from night to night. In response to this challenge, Weaver explained the following:

[The student leaders] came up with the idea of a shift leader who is either responsible for being there or being in charge and making sure the shift is staffed. So if the shift is understaffed, it's their responsibility to go on our Facebook page, to call their friends, to call the people they know and say "Hey, we need people on this night. Can you come in?"

Establishing shift leaders for each of the shelter's dinner, overnight, and breakfast shifts went a long way toward solving the shelter's staffing problems.

Professor Sena explained another challenge that SREHUP's student leaders had to solve was communicating effectively with one another about keeping the shelter stocked with food for dinner. As she explained, when the shelter first opened, students volunteering on a particular shift didn't know whether dinner that evening would be donated by another organization, whether they were responsible for cooking, or whether there were leftovers they could simply heat up and serve. Sena explained that, "So now we have a student who organizes all of that and will send an e-mail to the students before their shift that this is what's happening with dinner tonight." Sena added that this troubleshooting by SREHUP's leadership team was "just one example of how students have had to navigate what's not working and what can we do better." She characterized students' leadership development over the course of the winter as one of the dimensions of SREHUP about which she was most proud.

Finally, a third challenge that SREHUP students contended with was resistance to the very concept of a student-run shelter from friends, parents, professors, and administrators. While wariness on the part of Villanova administrators about a student-run homeless shelter was to be expected, more surprising was the resistance that came from closer to home. According to Weaver,

Even my mom told me not to do it. She said, "I don't want you in Philadelphia. I don't want you talking to homeless people. It's not safe. You should be focusing on extracurriculars that are going to further your career."

Likewise, Weaver added,

I had professors tell me that shelters are wrong and they perpetuate the system, and you should let people sleep on the streets because the government will do something real about it rather than putting them in shelters. And there was so much opposition to what I thought was a noble cause that I was very surprised.

While Weaver characterized herself as initially deflated by such resistance, in the end she was not deterred. Moreover, contending with these objections was likely an important step in students' leadership development as well as their own burgeoning understanding of the issues surrounding poverty and homelessness.

As made evident by the preceding paragraphs, the students leading SREHUP experienced some bumps and challenges in their first winter of operating what is believed to be the second student-run homeless shelter in the United States. But the students leading the project also demonstrated a sincere willingness to learn from each of these bumps and challenges, and to strive for continuous improvement in their work, in order to offer a humane experience to the men and women they are serving. As for the transferability of this student-run model beyond the cities of Cambridge and Philadelphia, Witcher explained the following:

I think it's really do-able. It was really surprising to me that if you ask for volunteers or you ask for donations. . . . I mean, man, there are so many donations and people who are interested in volunteering out there. If you keep it at a reasonable scale, I feel like this would be super easy to implement just about anywhere.

Likewise, Weaver noted,

I think all it takes to make the project work at a university is having enough students who are interested. . . . And I think as long as students care about the project and care about the people they're with, they'll definitely be able to succeed.

### Looking Ahead

As pointed out by the Villanova professor critical of SREHUP's efforts in the above-mentioned conversation with sophomore Weaver, student-run homeless shelters do not represent a direct solution to the issue of homelessness. Rather, reducing homelessness in Philadelphia and in the United States more broadly will require systemic changes in the availability of affordable housing, mental health services, jobs that pay a living wage, and so on. That said, increasing the number of student-run homeless shelters in American cities with both a sizable student population and homeless population offers two important steps in the right direction.

First, a recent—and important—innovation in the homeless services world is an initiative known as “Housing First.” The philosophy underlying Housing First is twofold—(a) it is both more cost-effective and more humane to place men and women contending with homelessness into permanent housing rather than homeless shelters, and (b) this housing should be supplemented with the various services that these individuals need to become self-sufficient again or to continue to live independently. Housing First represents an important step in America's support of men and women contending with homelessness and could potentially lead to the phasing out of dormitory-style homeless shelters in the coming decades. Even if Housing First becomes the predominant approach to combating homelessness, however, there will still remain a need in cities throughout the United States for emergency short-term shelter, if only as a bridge between an individual's first experience of homelessness and his or her acceptance into a Housing First program. With their all-volunteer structure, student-run shelters such as the HSHS and SREHUP offer an extremely low-cost option for such bridge housing. In this way, then, student-run homeless shelters could actually play an important role in the transition from a reliance on large dormitory-style homeless shelters to a Housing First model.

Second, for the past 30 years, approximately 50 students have graduated each year from Harvard, Tufts, Wellesley, and Boston University having had authentic and sustained interactions with men and women contending with homelessness. That number will double in the coming years as an equal number of students graduate from Villanova, UPenn, Temple, Drexel, and Swarthmore having experienced similar authentic and sustained interactions with the homeless through their volunteer work at SREHUP. The majority of these educated young men and women will then spread out across the United States and move into positions of leadership within the diverse professional and civic communities in which they settle. In both these professional and civic positions, these “alumni” of the HSHS and SREHUP will have the opportunity to draw upon their past experiences to advocate both formally and informally for housing, health, and employment policies that reduce the barriers to individuals transitioning out of homelessness. One hundred college graduates a year is a relatively small number; but that number expands exponentially if, say, universities in Chicago, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Miami decide to open student-run shelters of their own. In fairly short order, one can imagine literally thousands of college graduates spreading out across the United States equipped with the motivation and knowledge to be advocates for one of the most silenced groups in

American society. The effect of such advocates upon our country's treatment of and policies impacting the homeless could be a powerful one.

### References

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