Compassionately Hidden: The Church Telling Local Homeless to "Come to Our House"

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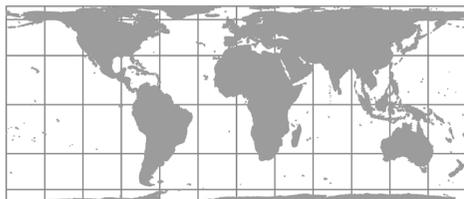
ABSTRACT

In early 2011, the To Our House (TOH) thermal shelter program opened its doors to homeless men in the New River Valley Area (NRV) of Virginia. The program was a grass roots response to the death of a well-known local homeless man and the goal of the program is to provide winter shelter for single adult men by using rotating host sites at local churches. We highlight that in the NRV local churches have sought to remedy a socially unjust situation by providing shelter for men that was previously unavailable. We illustrate that faith-based outreach in the New River Valley can be viewed as positive compassionate outreach by a caring community. While acknowledging the benefits of this compassionate outreach to more than 25 men in the NRV, we also offer a cautionary note regarding the dilemmas of this outreach suggesting that it has the potential to mask the problems of the local housing market.

Key words: rural homeless, thermal shelters, faith-based compassion

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a new emergency thermal shelter program catering to homeless men was launched in the New River Valley (NRV) of Southwest Virginia. Referred to as To Our House (TOH), this program relies on the volunteer efforts of a coalition of churches to provide shelter to homeless men in a relatively isolated area of Virginia during the winter months. It was the first time that a shelter program catering exclusively to men was initiated in the area. We have three aims in this paper. First, we seek to report on how the visibility and ultimately the death of a single homeless man, Teddy Henderson, led to the creation of the To Our House program in the New River Valley.

Our second aim is to acknowledge that in the NRV local churches have sought to remedy a socially unjust situation by providing

shelter for men that was previously unavailable. In the words of Terry Smusz, Executive Director of the New River Community Action (NRCA), the thermal shelter system in the NRV "couldn't be done without the churches" (Smusz 2011). Here we illustrate the particular challenges that rural homelessness poses as well as the process of mobilization of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the provision of welfare. In an area characterized by smaller towns and large rural spaces, the NRV does not have the scale to allow the professionalized resources and funding that supports the governmental and NGO approaches seen in medium- to large-size cities, such as continuum of care programs, a variety of shelters with services for transitional housing, and permanent affordable housing. The NRV is also an area where faith-based outreach remains strong, so it is not surprising to find faith-based organizations (FBOs) involved in welfare provision. From this perspective, the compassionate outreach by FBOs in the NRV might be viewed as a more accommodating and inclusive approach to homeless provision in comparison to the more punitive or exclusionary policies that are linked to homeless individuals in urban areas.

Our third aim is more suggestive. We feel that it is important to acknowledge the delicate nature of this compassionate outreach. We argue that the TOH program relies on the ongoing care and compassion as well as the strategic mobilization and financial resources of local faith-based organizations to operate. Our goal is not to challenge whether or not faith-based organizations (FBOs) should be involved in welfare provision, rather we seek to show how a successful thermal shelter program operated by local churches does risk masking an affordable housing dilemma in the NRV. It is also worth noting that the success of a faith-based approach ultimately rests on its acceptance by the intended recipients of the outreach. This student-driven research incorporates a series of ten semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in homeless service provision in the New River Valley as well as leaders of faith-based organizations.

REVISITING HOMELESSNESS

Recent literature stemming from geography, urban studies, sociology and other social science disciplines has extensively documented the more punitive measures that have been employed to make the homeless in urban areas less visible (e.g., aggressive policing, removal of the homeless from public space by force or law, laws against sleeping in public, panhandling and begging, removal and relocation of shelters, soup kitchens and other facilities) (Crawford 2008; Davis 1990; DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Lee and Price-Spratlen 2004; Wolch and Dear 1993; Smith 1996; McNamara et al. 2013; Mitchell 1997; 1998a, 1998b; 2003). Numerous examples of containment and control have been uncovered and help lend credence to Mitchell's (1997) claim that a neoliberal agenda has sought to annihilate the homeless subject. As Lee et al. (2010) note, prior to the 1980s there were three main periods that attracted researchers studying homelessness: (1) the "tramp years" from 1890s-1920s; (2) the Great Depression of the 1930s; and (3) the "skid row" years of the 1940s-1970s. But it was following the economic downturn of the early 1980s that homelessness in America came to be seen as "the most critical social issue in urban America" (Saelinger 2006, 545) with the amount of literature produced mimicking the increased visible presence of the homeless population. For Don Mitchell (2011), the sudden explosion of homeless people on the streets in the 1980s led to increased activism as well as a marked growth in emergency shelters in urban areas. What made this most recent period unique, according to Mitchell (2011) was the sudden visibility of the homeless population, with city streets, sidewalks, and parks from the Central Business District to the suburbs being 'littered' with homeless individuals. Unlike the skid row years, this new homeless population was "out of place," no longer confined to

particular neighborhoods of older industrial cities. In addition, this new homeless was demographically different (Takahashi 1996). Where previously the face of homelessness was white "disaffiliated men who had severed (or had never sustained) ties to family, workplace, church, or community, presumably because of substantial problems with their socialization skills and/or their personalities" (Saelinger 2006, 548), now new faces comprised of "young and old men, women, children, teens, [and] whole families" that were "disproportionately Black" (Mitchell 2011, 940) populated the homeless ranks.

Whereas previously homelessness was linked in the public's mind to personal deficits, the downsizing of welfare services combined with an extremely competitive job market exposed just how difficult it was for individuals to secure governmental benefits and paid work. Those viewed to be at risk of homelessness represented a broad demographic and consequently challenged public representation and perception of homeless individuals as undeserving and blameworthy. As children, seniors, families, women, veterans, and minorities joined men as homeless, the conversation about the root causes of homelessness became muddled. The most obvious indication of increased public sympathy was the passing by Congress of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, later named the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This act recognized that the causes of homeless were not only many but complex and would require solutions that were equally diverse. Moreover, the act acknowledged that homelessness had become an unprecedented crisis that required (albeit reluctantly) a federal response, but also required enactment at the local level. The act did provide a policy vehicle to ensure that large amounts of funding was steered towards the construction or renovation of a variety of different types of shelters, as well as money for the establishment of health care programs, limited job training, adult literacy programs, and access to public school education for homeless children. For the first time,

there was a source of federal support for new types of shelters including transitional housing to assist individuals with disabilities and homeless families as well as support for initiatives such as the Emergency Shelter Grant Program. But as Mitchell astutely noted, the 1980s were not simply a "crisis *for* people made homeless" but also a time marked by "a crisis *of* capital" which ensured that the public presence of the homeless became a lingering dilemma (2011, 941, italics in original).

Mitchell (2011) also highlighted that a "continuum-of-care" or "coordinated services" approach and the initial enthusiasm for the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 lost momentum in the 1990s as neoliberal reforms and a more competitive urban economic climate characterized by deindustrialization, post-Fordism and globalization led more cities to adopt entrepreneurial models of urban growth. The continued growth of a visible urban homeless population in the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with the new attempts by cities to secure the "footloose capital, tourists, suburban visitors, and gentrifiers" (Mitchell 2011, 934), as well as a rising sense of "compassion fatigue" (Millich 1994), led to a situation where "homeless individuals and the facilities that served them (shelters, drop-in centers, halfway houses, etc.), were seen more and more as liabilities" (Mitchell 2011, 934). As Link et al. (1995, 534) noted, in the context of homelessness, evidence of compassion fatigue emerged in the form of mass media portrayals that "repeatedly emphasize[d] growing public indifference and anger toward homeless people spawned by extensive contact with them." In addition, Mitchell (2011, 942) noted that compassion became more "distanced," meaning that support for services like shelters often did not emerge from the immediate community.

Put simply, local assistance was often replaced with local backlash and expressions of NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard) and efforts to improve the city's safety and image replaced the willingness to aid the homeless.

The rise of anti-begging ordinances is often used to illustrate the growing frustration of a previously sympathetic public (Amster 2003; Millich 1994). Ultimately, the shift in the "public's attitude toward the homeless from compassion to intolerance and even hostility" (Millich 1994, note 6), resulted in the "criminalization of homeless people in many cities" (Mitchell 2011, 934). With cities seeking to adopt and enforce zero tolerance policies that deliberately and diligently seek to remove homeless people from public sites and sight, precious little has been done to improve the situation for homeless individuals. Moreover, recent programs like Housing First, Mitchell (2011, 949) argued, have done little to "address the structural problem of homelessness in America."

In retracing the history of the urban homeless population in the United States, Mitchell noted that during the 1990s, the lack of collective or state-led regulatory efforts led to a "more full-fledged turn to charity" (2011, 945). Mitchell did not elaborate on the implications of this turn except to claim that charitable efforts to address homeless still operated under the oversight of the government, and frequently resulted in homeless individuals having "to endure religious proselytizing and other forms of indoctrination as the price of a bed or a meal" (Mitchell 2011, 946). But as Hackworth (2009) demonstrated, faith-based community development took on a more prominent role during this time period. Two federal actions were critical: Charitable Choice (a provision in the 1996 welfare reform law) and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (first created by President Bush in 2001). These two actions permitted the funding of religious charities via block grants and allowed faith-based organizations (FBOs) to compete for federal contracts by exempting these organizations from restrictions in hiring based on religious belief or practice and permitting these organizations to retain their religious character in the provision of services.

The involvement of faith-based agencies in the delivery of welfare provision has trig-gered a wave of commentary. For some, "[t]he role of religion in promoting the social and economic welfare of communities and their people is timeless" (Wright 2004, 27). Other researchers have challenged the constitutional appropriateness of a church-state partnership (Boden 2005), while other investigators have highlighted the strategic value that FBOs can play in community building process while simultaneously highlighting the organizational challenges these groups face when trying to directly deal with the provision of affordable housing (de Souza Briggs 2004). As Leginski (2007, I-28) summarized: "[i]n past waves of homelessness, the moral imperative of responding to people in desperate circumstances has prevailed. Charity, church, kin, and compassion often did more to redress homelessness than civic administration. But in the face of complex contemporary homelessness, the force of government legislation, policy, and financial resources continue to be at the frontlines of our expectations and approaches to solve this crisis." Xavier de Souza Briggs (2004, 50) arrived as a similar conclusion, noting that when it comes to providing *direct* housing, FBOs face the same challenges that secular non-profits experience:

> balancing bricks-and-mortar and financial objectives with broader social aims, including perceived obligations to serve the most disadvantaged in the community; balancing the politics of the immediate neighborhood with that of city hall; and beyond politics, responding to the market dynamics—price pressures, unforeseen demand, and more—that make housing unpredictable and quite distinct from welfare, health, education, and other services that are less market driven.

The above summation, we hope captures some of the broad narratives regarding the homeless in *urban* America in the last few decades. Without question, since the early 1980s various efforts have been made by scholars, social activists and policy makers

to define and enumerate the homeless population according to a variety of methodologies and statistical analyses (e.g. Cloke et al. 2001; Cordray and Pion 1991; Lee et al. 2003; Metraux et al. 2001; Rossi et al. 1987). Researchers have sought to identify the individual/personal and structural barriers or risk factors that lead to homelessness and to highlight the complexity of trying to help America's homeless. Much of this work has had an urban focus, with many of the findings indicating a punitive urban environment for homeless individuals (e.g. DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Hebert 2011; Wacquant 2009). As the implications of Charitable Choice and other faith-based initiatives are negotiated, it remains important to investigate how the homeless situation is unfolding in rural areas where professionalized resources and funding support is more limited.

RETHINKING RURAL HOMELESSNESS

In smaller urban centers and rural areas the lack of visible poor and rather narrow definitions of homelessness have helped to keep the homeless "unseen, unacknowledged, [and] unattended" (Cloke and Milbourne 2006, 261). In these areas, efforts to police the poor are not as obvious as in larger urban centers and headcounts are difficult to perform when homeless people are not on the street. Rural homeless are often "hidden in remote locations like hunting or fishing cabins, abandoned barns or trailers, or in vehicles. They are also frequently doubled-up in other people's homes rather than in the care of a social service agency" (Hodas and Myers 2008, 29). The lack of visibility often contributes to a scenario where public officials and community members do not feel that homelessness is a problem—or even exists—in their community (Hodas and Myers 2008). In addition, Cloke and Milbourne (2000) highlighted that sometimes in rural areas, a lingering sense of the rural idyll or concern over social surveillance (people will know if you are homeless) prevent homeless

people from acknowledging their problem in terms of homelessness, so that even in periods of crisis, people employ "tactics of invisibility" (e.g. using short-term insecure accommodation or sleeping somewhere out of sight) or turn to outmigration rather than declaring themselves or risk be labeled as homeless.

The lack of visibility coupled with the absence of rural homeless services means that the rural homeless not only remain unidentified, they are under-reported, a scenario that further contributes to perception that there are few, if any, homeless people living in rural communities (Lawrence 1995). As Cloke et al. argued, it is imperative to investigate rural homelessness not only because it has been underemphasized, but because rural areas reflect "difficult terrains of service, where clients and volunteers are sparsely distributed and where service provision can be hampered by diseconomies of scale" (2010, 211). The unseen nature of rural homeless individuals, combined with the challenges of providing public transportation and outreach in isolated environments, as well as high rural poverty rates, a shortage of decent affordable housing, a lack of services (particularly professional services in mental and behavioral health care) and a prioritization of urban needs with regards to allocation of Federal funds make the challenges of service delivery in small towns and rural areas different from larger urban centers. In areas where services are provided there is concern over the type of service model (e.g., does the local community have the ability to adapt a model that caters to the needs of the homeless living in their particular area or will it simply adopt an urban-based model) as well as the style and amount of outreach being performed to encourage homeless individuals to use these services.

LOCAL COMPASSION IN A PLACE REMOVED: THE CREATION OF THE TO OUR HOUSE (TOH) PROGRAM IN VIRGINIA'S NEW RIVER VALLEY

We follow Cloke et al. (2010, 211) in arguing that "towns serving rural hinterlands

often become the first point of contact [between homeless individuals and service providers], places where homelessness becomes visible and where fixed point services are developed in response to this visibility." The thermal shelters for the TOH program are located in Blacksburg, VA and Christiansburg, VA. While these two towns are considered to be part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), only the Town of Blacksburg contains a population that exceeds 35,000 people, and the entire population for the New River Valley (NRV) is less than 200,000 people. The NRV includes the counties of Montgomery (including the towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg), Pulaski, Floyd, Giles and the independent City of Radford (Fig. 1).

While containing urban populations, the New River Valley has extensive open spaces and a low population density. The NRV is spatially removed from major urban centers and contains many rural residents. In addition, the counties that comprise the NRV

have poverty rates that not only exceed the state average, but are also higher than the national average. According to *The 2001 Virginia Rural Homeless Survey*, in Virginia's Southwest Region, there were "18,824 homeless person events[1] estimated for 2001" accounting for more than half of all homeless events in the state (Koebel et al. 2001, 9). It was estimated that the New River Valley contributed 8.4% of all homeless person events (Koebel et al. 2001, 11). Koebel and Abdelfattah (2003) estimated that the capital cost for constructing permanent housing for the chronically homeless in Virginia could be $440 million, with another $13 million required in annual building operating subsidies *excluding services*. Even in the heyday of political and public support for addressing this problem, the available resources have never been sufficient to reach smaller communities such as those found in the NRV.

We have struggled with the dilemma of using the death of a homeless man, Teddy
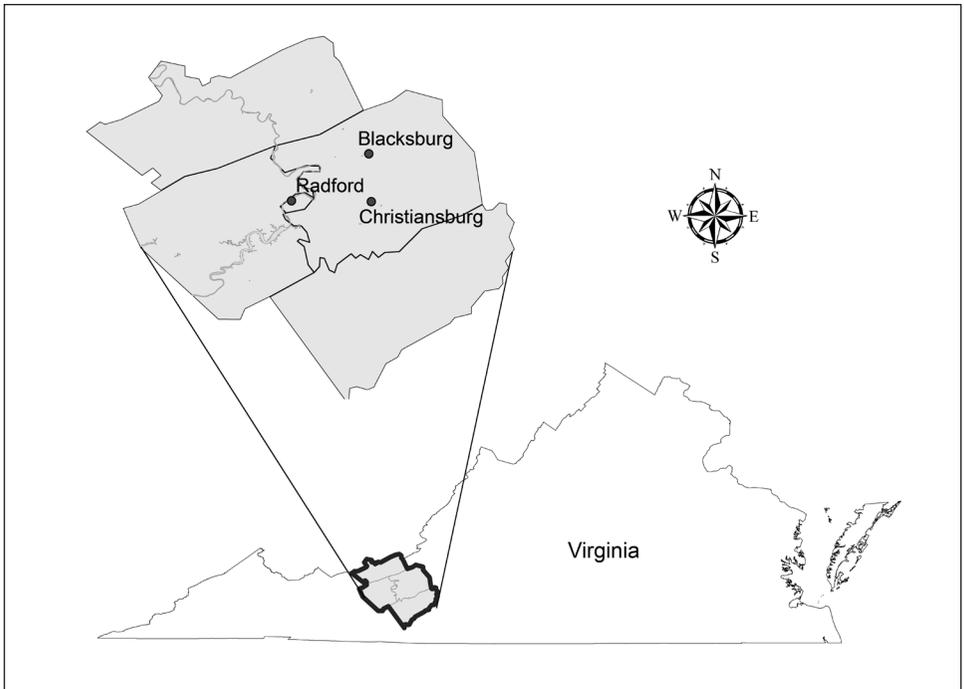

Figure 1. Study area.

Owen Henderson[2], to engage in an academic exercise. Mr. Henderson's death, however, was the catalyst for the creation of a new program called To Our House, with the acronym capturing both the initials of Mr. Henderson's full name and the intention of sheltering homeless men in community houses of worship. Mr. Henderson was the most recognizable homeless individual in the NRV and his death stimulated the formation of "a grassroots group formed to combat homelessness in his memory" (Moxley 2009, n.p.). As Carol Johnson, Director for the New River Valley Shelter in Southwest Virginia, summarized, "[o]ur homeless population looks different. It's not as visible because you don't see a lot of people living on the street" (Johnson, quoted in Moxley 2009, n.p.). Teddy Henderson was known, and it was his death that triggered a substantial response to the challenge of sheltering homeless men in the NRV. According to Pastor Bryson Smith (Fieldstone United Methodist), "Teddy's death uncovered a gap in service" and a "need in the community that some would argue does not exist" (Smith 2011).

Although *The 2001 Virginia Rural Homeless Survey* documented that "[e]mergency shelter was most frequently ranked the number 1 service need, followed by transitional shelter and emergency rent assistance" (Koebel et al. 2001, 14), before the creation of the TOH program homeless men had limited options in the NRV. Prior to the establishment of the TOH program, homeless service needs in the NRV were addressed by various organizations, including The New River Family Shelter, the Women's Resource Center, the United Way, and the Salvation Army. Despite this support, Moxley (2009, n.p.) critically pointed out that "between Christiansburg and Blacksburg, [only] six shelter spaces exist[ed] to serve homeless families with children. There [were] no shelters that [took] single men or women."

As noted above, previous research has shown that the lack of shelters and services in rural areas forces 'people to either double up at whatever social cost or move to a city for emergency shelter' (Koebel and Abdelfattah, 2004, 15). In addition, given the shortage of beds, it is common for informal networks of agencies, churches and charities to provide the equivalent of emergency assistance through the purchasing of restaurant vouchers, bus tickets, or hotel vouchers (Moxley, 2009). These scenarios were common in the New River Valley. For example, in one moment of desperation, the local pastor of Redeemer Church, David Vance, resorted to the website couchsurfing.com to aid an individual (Moxley 2009). Couchsurfing is a hospitality and social networking site where a community of travelers (usually global travelers) visit to secure a room, bed, or couch to stay at when they visit local communities. While this piecemeal strategy did provide short-term solutions for homeless individuals, it also revealed that an effective system of shelter or housing remained wanting. The transferring of men from the NRV to facilities in adjacent communities (such as Roanoke's Rescue Mission) not only spatially displaced the NRV's homeless population, it also had the potential to compound the service delivery in neighboring counties/cities. A bus ticket or a single night's accommodation in a motel was clearly not a preventative strategy, as these solutions did not offer ongoing assistance such as legal aid, nor did they help individuals transition back to permanent housing.

It was during Mr. Henderson's memorial service in 2009, attended by 40 members of the local community, that a conversation regarding the challenges of homelessness and poverty in the NRV was initiated. The attendees were a mix of clerics and laity from interfaith organizations, concerned citizens, and human and social services professionals (e.g. New River Community Action) (Rees 2011). A number of these concerned citizens intent on honoring the death of one of their citizens started meeting regularly, determined to "raise awareness of homeless men in the New River Valley" (Hardbarger 2011, n.p.). As one pastor summarized,

Teddy's memory inspired a group of individuals to do something, whatever that something was. Teddy is our conscience through this because after Teddy's death many felt there was a missed opportunity. It is a great collaboration of spiritual and service communities. If you start looking for homeless people you will find them. You can't just sweep them to Roanoke (Fleischer 2011).

Another pastor commented: "We have shelters for women and shelters for children. The story of Teddy is compelling, haunting. When he froze to death, he froze to death within a mile of 6 warm churches" (Lough 2011).[3] Reverend Susan Verbrugge (2011) adds that "although Teddy wanted to stay on the streets" his death produced "a sense of guilt" and "people felt called to help the men in the NRV where there is a gap in service." She further noted that "the city is less and less involved and does not have much for them. Cheaper housing is still a struggle" (Verbrugge 2011).

Verbrugge's statement about a lack of housing options for homeless or low-income individuals has merit. According to Census data, rental housing in the Blacksburg-Christiansburg-Radford Metropolitan Statistical area is very unaffordable particularly for households with incomes below $20,000. This includes most principal wage earners in minimum-wage jobs and those dependent on social support or otherwise scrapping through. The 2011 American Community Survey reported that 96% of renters with incomes below $20,000 in the Blacksburg metropolitan area were housing-cost burdened, meaning that 30% or more of their income was consumed by housing. Many of these households face extreme cost burdens where housing takes 50% or more of their income.

Although there are a large number of apartments for a small metropolitan area, most of these are occupied by undergraduate students attending the region's universities (Virginia Tech and Radford University). The college student demand for off-campus housing distorts the local market in a variety of ways. The rental housing supply consists primarily of apartments built for students whose ability to pay often reflects family resources more so than personal incomes. Rents in the undergraduate student housing market are shared across multiple roommates, making those rents more affordable for each student but less affordable for a person living alone or a family with one income earner.

The student market also creates a scarcity effect (New River Valley Planning District Commission 2014). Rental units, including houses, closer to the campuses and on bus lines are in high demand. Rent levels and student life styles make most of these areas unaffordable and unattractive to non-students. A few old mobile home parks provide some of the cheapest and poorest quality housing in Blacksburg and Radford, but the sites are redeveloped whenever possible with housing that is completely out of reach for anyone with a modest income, not to mention the poor (Gangloff 2014). There were only 2,209 units receiving federal rental assistance for very low-income occupants in the NRV in 2010, some of which are age restricted (Housing Virginia 2014). Based on HUD estimates accessed through Huduser.org (2014), there were slightly over 11,000 renter households potentially eligible for these units based on income and the presence of one or more housing problems. The assisted properties are also dispersed across the region, and only a few of the units are in the primary urban centers. They provide limited or no social services on-site. Although these are a primary defense against slipping into irregular shelter and homelessness, they are not intended to be the pathway for the homeless to get back to stable housing. At the same time as affordable rental housing in the denser locations has virtually disappeared, people in non-student neighborhoods are very resistant to allowing rental housing to be developed outside of student-dominated neighborhoods. Regardless of sentiments about the need for affordable housing, these residents fear that any development other

than single family detached home will become student occupied, and so they oppose its development. No policies currently exist that would impose occupancy restrictions to help preserve affordable housing for non-students, although the Low Income Housing Tax Credit bars most students from being the leaseholder. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to obtain sites for affordable housing development. The quantity of affordable housing production is therefore very limited and costs remain out of reach for anyone on income support or in a minimum wage job. There are older, cheap housing units of poor quality outside of the primary urban locations. This supply includes a few apartment buildings, subdivided houses in distressed locations, and mobile home parks, as well as temporary housing in recreational vehicles and vans.

THE "FAITH FACTOR" IN THE NRV: THE CHOICE FOR CHARITY

The creation of the TOH program serves as an acknowledgement that the need for a coordinated effort to provide shelter and associated services for homeless men existed in this Virginia community. When discussing the men that ultimately used the TOH program, Terry Smusz (2011) noted, "there is simply not enough low income or affordable housing" and although "some of the men have income, it's not enough … so they live in the woods or at Crater Lake camp." As noted, in the NRV there has been an ongoing struggle by local professional services and faith-based organizations to find a potentially workable solution to local homelessness as an alternative to the "move to the bigger city" prescription. As noted above, "[t]here is an intricate political history to the faith-based social services movement in the U.S. (Hackworth 2010, 753). While a full investigation of the history of faith-based activity is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that in the NRV, there *is* a history of church involvement in shelter provision, with six of the shelter spaces available to families

being located in two church-owned properties. Religious providers have functioned as a key link in the public social safety net in the region. Moreover, larger debates concerning the constitutional, pragmatic and ecclesiastic implications or merits of faith-based initiatives and programs such as charitable choice have not generated much public commentary or debate in the region.

From the outset, those involved with the creation of the TOH program had three principal goals: (1) to develop a brochure that documented existing area services that could be distributed by local libraries to inform those asking for help where food, transportation, clothing and housing could be found; (2) to launch a website to disseminate information to the public; and (3) to organize a temporary emergency thermal shelter program during the winter months for single men in the area. Not surprisingly, it was the third goal that proved to be the most difficult to accomplish. After exploring cooperative faith-based models in operation in a number of other Virginia communities (Roanoke, Charlottesville, Norfolk, Winchester, and Harrisonburg), local pastors (e.g., Fieldstone United Methodist Church Pastor Bryson Smith) expressed a willingness to use church facilities to create a temporary housing facility. In particular, the People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry (PACEM) model that had been established in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2004 provided inspiration (Rees 2011). Operating on the principle that every head deserves a pillow, *PACEM's shelters operate as sites of "last resort," with the participating, individuals, congregations, and organizations seeking to establish and expand a* "community safety net" for those in need (People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry 2013). Mimicking the efforts in Charlottesville, VA, the TOH program adopted a rotational shelter system relying mainly on local Christian churches of multiple dominations. The use of local churches required host congregations to meet the appropriate zoning permissions and to receive approval from the local planning de-

partment (in Blacksburg) in order to allow the churches to provide temporary thermal shelter. While the TOH program explicitly states that guests should not be pushed to attend religious services, host congregations are permitted to hold and invite guests to participate in Bible study and prayer meetings or other forms of religious service (To Our House 2011). In addition, the welcome letter distributed to shelter users does include the following message "[w]e hope you feel love and [peace] through our church family and friends as we prepare meals and share some time with you" and attention is drawn to the fact that prayer requests can be made (To Our House 2011). Meal blessings are also performed. Without question, many of the volunteers who participate in the TOH draw a connection between their involvement and the opportunity to live out their faith. For example, Pastor Rob Lough (2011) of Pembroke United Methodist and Mt. Lebanon explained TOH has helped keep his church relevant, by allowing people to act out their faith.

In the NRV, homeless men are transported to the designated church from an intake center—the lobby of the New River Community Action building—after arriving in the early evening. The men are served a hot dinner and provided with a bed, bedding, toiletries as well as opportunities to play games, watch television and interact with volunteers (Hardbarger 2011). The men are expected to leave the designated facility by 7:00am after being served a cold breakfast and provided with a bagged lunch. As Rees (2011) notes, the TOH program provides a low-barrier emergency shelter, and therefore there is risk involved, but she notes that the program "is meeting a need for our guests." In this case low-barrier means that the men are not asked about their backgrounds, so it is unknown to volunteers if the person has been a convicted felon (Mathes 2011)

The To Our House program opened its doors as planned in early January 2011, twenty-six months after Mr. Henderson's death. In its inaugural season (limited to just four months), the TOH program was utilized by 28 different men who required the provision of 403 nights of shelter. Remarkably, the needs of these men were accommodated by "29 host and support congregations or community organizations, staffed by 290 volunteers" (To Our House 2012). During 2011-2012, the program expanded its service delivery from 11 to 21 weeks (147 nights) and necessitated a larger network of supporting churches and volunteers. Once again, 28 men used the shelters for a total of 907 shelter nights and more than 2,700 meals. The average number of guests each night was 7 men. During the second season, there were 12 host organizations and 751 organization volunteers who amassed more than 5,300 volunteer hours (To Our House 2012). If the large number of volunteers and volunteer hours dedicated to the TOH program is indicative, then it appears that the local residents are not yet fully suffering from compassion fatigue. From this perspective, the TOH program can be read as an example of compassionate outreach exercised by a caring community.

THE RISK OF COMPASSION: A CAUTIONARY NOTE ABOUT THE DILEMMAS OF A FAITH-BASED HOMELESS SHELTER

At a time when churches across the country have been forced to cease providing services (shelters, soup kitchens, warming rooms) by a host of zoning requirements, the launch of the new shelter program in the NRV provides the basis for a more compassionate story. At the same time, while faith-based involvement may now mean that the homeless situation in the NRV is no longer unacknowledged, of concern is whether this thermal shelter program will make it easier for local and more senior governments to ignore the housing dilemma in the region. Put simply, homeless men in the NRV may be being compassionately hidden. In the NRV, Teddy Henderson's death highlighted the lack of a critical service to the area's disadvantaged. As noted, nearly

30 men have made use of the new thermal shelter program. While the TOH program fulfills a number of broader social aims (e.g., allowing people to (re)connect with their faith, to make available resources to homeless men), it must be stated that it is not designed to deliver affordable housing. In a community that does not yet suffer from compassion fatigue, the risk of creating a functioning thermal shelter program is that it will potentially mask the violence of the local housing market, thereby enlarging the "capacity fatigue" of the region's housing stock. Future research needs to be directed towards determining the impacts of devolving social service provision to religious and charitable organizations in the NRV and elsewhere before offering a more definitive conclusion. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the current study did not seek to uncover how the men using the new shelter system felt about this new initiative.

CONCLUSION

The chronically homeless need permanent subsidized housing with a significant level of health and social services. The temporary and episodically homeless also need specialized housing as an alternative to living in cars or moving among relatives and friends who might only be one rung higher on the housing ladder. While it has been acknowledged that "emergency shelters are at best a stop-gap measure" and that "[i]t takes far more effort and requires more resources than just emergency shelters to move the homeless forward to permanent housing" (Koebel and Abdelfattah 2004, 16), currently in the NRV more ambitious services (e.g., extensive case management, job training, health care, emergency financial assistance, legal aid, and drug and substance abuse rehabilitation) and permanent housing are still a struggle to provide. In the NRV, the creation of a temporary thermal shelter was the occasion for a compassionate community to offer an alternative to a group of men who had limited options. In the absence of a more secure and long-term financial plan that would create a greater supply of housing and assistance in the NRV, the TOH commendably provides an alternative. Yet the risk of the thermal shelter is that it might make homelessness in the NRV more invisible to rest of the community. It was, of course, Mr. Henderson's visibility that helped spark the creation of the TOH program in the first place.

Volunteers in the TOH program are aware of the dilemmas of faith-based outreach and many recognize that there are implications of their compassionate deeds. It remains to be seen whether the TOH program can spark a more sustained discussion about how the needs of homeless men in the NRV might extend beyond the capability or capacity of compassionate outreach.

NOTES

1. Since homelessness can be episodic even among the chronically homeless, homeless person events estimate the total number of people who would experience one or more episodes of being homeless throughout the year.
2. Teddy Owen Henderson was also known as Adul-Shahid (Moxley 2008).
3. It was ultimately determined that Mr. Henderson did not die from exposure.

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