



An Overcomer: Not Bound by Circumstances

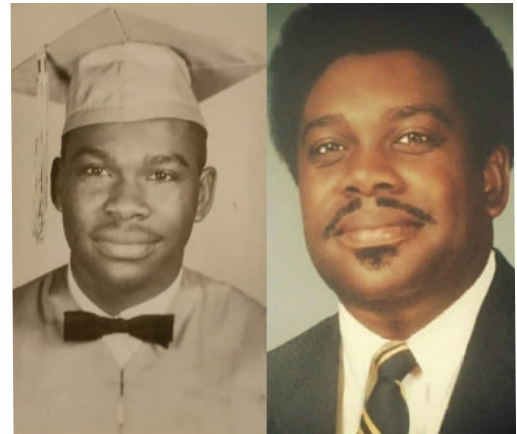
One might wonder what it means to be an overcomer. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it means to overcome something, or succeed in dealing with or gaining control of a problem or difficulty. This word defines my father. He faced so many adversities as a young man, but he was determined to not become a statistic. My hope is that by reading this article, it will inspire those facing homelessness to know that they do not have to be bound by their circumstances.

Born February 27, 1947 in Montgomery (AL), to a teenage girl, my dad was already predestined to face many adversities. His mom made the decision to allow a family member to raise him as they had more to offer. Little did she know, her baby boy would succumb to abuse growing up in their household. This would lead to him running away from their home as a young teen with nowhere to go.

Now facing homelessness, my dad had to quickly learn how to navigate "on the streets" being a young black male. He often shared with me how the workers at the bus stop would allow him to sleep inside the terminal. When that was not an option, he shared how he would slide under cars that had been recently driven to keep warm by the engine. For food, he shared that the prostitutes, who worked in the areas he stayed, would share their food with him.

Even though my dad faced all these obstacles because he was homeless, he was later able to stay in a facility that enabled him to finish high school and enlist in the military. He was always a stickler for education. He wanted to prove that he was not bound by his past circumstances. Now with a wife and 3 children, he had even more motivation to succeed. He obtained a bachelor's and master's degree, then went on to obtain a Ph.D. He was always adamant about never wanting to be what everyone thought he was predestined to be, in jail, an abuser, or even dead.

He attributed his success to a pastor that took him in while he was homeless and taught him about Jesus. He leaned on his faith and became a pastor himself, with a compassionate heart for helping those that were homeless in his community. He would often bring those that were staying in the



Dr. Isiah Houston, Sr. PhD

Salvation Army to his church and even to his home for dinner. For those he saw sleeping on the streets, my dad would provide housing for as many as he could afford.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Black people make up 37% of people experiencing homelessness in the US, even though they make up only 13% of the total population. Knowing this, my dad did not want to be known as one of the 37%. He pressed to become an overcomer, often quoting, "I can do all things through Christ". The legacy he left was one of perseverance and resilience, understanding that your past does not dictate your future. Until this day, the church he founded called The Church of God of Tuscaloosa (AL), continues to support those that are homeless by providing hotels stays, finding housing through collaboration with a local housing counselor, and providing transportation and food vouchers. Because of his high regard for education, a scholarship fund was formed in his name. Although we know that every journey does not end with a "happily ever after", we should believe we too can be overcomers, not bound to challenging circumstances we face.

Vadonna Williams
FRIENDS PAC Member

"The 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress," U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed, September 11, 2024, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2023-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of->

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Family Promise of Lubbock: Building Amid Lack

Many communities are suffering with an increase in individuals dealing with home insecurity and homelessness. There are many assumptions and thoughts as to why a person or family is not homed. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, <https://www.usich.gov>, in 2020, 1.25 million people “experienced sheltered homelessness,” thus proving this is an issue that needs productive attention. (Sheltered homelessness encompasses supervised shelters that provide temporary housing.)

Family Promise of Lubbock (FPL) is an organization that helps individuals and families dealing with home insecurity, among other needs. FPL has served more than 550 families in 26 years. Speaking with Priscilla Hipolito, a representative of FPL, she shared that the program helps individuals and families dealing with housing insecurity and provides rental, utility, and food assistance. FPL is able to provide homes to up to six families at a time. Options include a community house, as well as duplexes that provide for independent living, with support.

When asked what the greatest need for the families served by FPL is, we learned that individuals and families often come to FPL in need of utilities, food, and rent assistance, and that the lack of these concrete supports can be a precursor to home insecurity. When families can't meet their financial needs with their current income, it can lead to difficult times and hardship.

FPL has noticed that individuals needing housing support are often not knowledgeable about community resources. For instance, the people they serve have indicated being unaware of clothing closets, food pantries, the local food bank, and organizations that feed meals to families. Priscilla mentioned, “there is a place that gives out dinner Monday through Sunday.” This information is pertinent to the survival of many families.

On Family Promise of Lubbock's website there is a quote, “Not only a shelter, but a Program.” When asked what this means, the answer

was simple but profound. The six-month program that FPL provides includes structure, support, information, tools, and skills. When someone receives home assistance from FPL, they are exposed to different tools and skills that teach how to budget and how to apply and interview for jobs. Adults are expected to obtain full-time employment during this time.

In preparation to live independently, families in the program receive education on savings, credit scores, and resources available. While a family is housed with FPL, most everything is provided for them including diapers, hygiene supplies, cleaning supplies, linens and more. These resources allow families to save their person-

al funds to contribute to their own home once acquired.

Family Promise of Lubbock doesn't simply kick individuals out after six months, instead they host a graduate program that continues to provide support to families that have graduated from the program and are living independently. This provides a familiar avenue for families to reach out for help if needed.

The assistance, education, and support provided by Family Promise of Lubbock is funded through donations and grants. To learn more about how this program is impacting the community, check out FamilyPromiseLubbock.org

*By Paula Bibbs-Samuels
FRIENDS PAC Member*



Making the Invisible Visible: Addressing Homelessness in America

I have traveled throughout the nation to different places such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, New York, Ohio, Miami, and throughout my home state, New Jersey. It is heartbreaking to witness how economic disparities have taken a toll on so many people. Every bus terminal, street corner, bridge underpass, and many restaurants and city sidewalks are lined with tents and cars that testify to the current state of homelessness in the U.S.A. Yet, we turn our eyes away from what we are witnessing and lower our voices about the homelessness crisis. Perhaps it is because we are just one payment away from being in their position, or we consider ourselves so wealthy that we criticize those experiencing homelessness, thinking it was something they did to get there.

The truth is that poverty is not a person's fault. Poverty is defined as the state of being extremely poor, and it can occur for many reasons beyond an individual's control. A person may not have the networks, means, housing, or insurance to flourish and thrive in their community. We must ask ourselves, have we become a materialistic society that does not care about helping our neighbors?

The Current State of Homelessness:

Homelessness in America is a complex and multifaceted issue that has persisted for decades, affecting millions of individuals and families. Despite the United States being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, a significant portion of its population remains without a stable place to call home. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this crisis, shedding light on the vulnerabilities of those living on the margins. Understanding the current state of homelessness and exploring potential solutions is crucial to making the invisible visible and ensuring that everyone has access to safe and stable housing.

As of the latest data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), on any given night in 2023, approximately 580,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States. This figure includes individuals and families living in shelters, transitional housing, and those unsheltered on the streets.

While this number represents a slight decrease from previous years, it still highlights a significant issue that requires urgent attention.

A deeper dive into the demographics reveals that certain groups are disproportionately affected. Veterans, LGBTQ+ youth, and people of color, particularly African Americans, are overrepresented in the homeless population. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, African Americans account for 39% of the homeless population despite representing only 13% of the general population. Similarly, LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness compared to their heterosexual peers.

Causes of Homelessness:

Homelessness is rarely the result of a single factor; instead, it is typically the outcome of various interconnected issues. Economic factors such as unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and low wages play a significant role. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that there is **a shortage of over 7 million affordable and available rental homes for extremely low-income renters.**

Additionally, systemic issues such as racial inequality, mental health challenges, and substance abuse contribute to the problem. The lack of access to adequate mental health services and addiction treatment often leaves individuals vulnerable to becoming and remaining homeless. The criminalization of homelessness, through laws against sleeping in public spaces or loitering, can further exacerbate the situation by pushing individuals into a cycle of incarceration and instability.

Fear, Shame, and Stigma:

One of the significant barriers to addressing homelessness effectively is the pervasive fear, shame, and stigma associated with it. Many people experiencing homelessness are hesitant to seek help due to the fear of being judged or discriminated against. **Society often views homelessness as a personal failure rather than a symptom of broader systemic issues, leading to shame and isolation among those affected.**

Communities often turn a blind eye to the homelessness crisis, either out of discomfort or the misconception that it is an unsolvable problem. This indifference perpetuates the cycle of homelessness, as individuals are left without the necessary support to regain stability. It is crucial to challenge these stigmas and foster a more compassionate and understanding perspective.

Potential Solutions:

Addressing homelessness requires a multifaceted approach that tackles both immediate needs and systemic issues. **Here are some potential solutions:**

- Increase Affordable Housing:** Expanding the availability of affordable housing is critical. This can be achieved through government subsidies, tax incentives for developers, and inclusionary zoning laws that require a percentage of new housing to be affordable.
- Housing First Approach:** This model prioritizes providing permanent housing to homeless individuals without preconditions. Research has shown that stable housing can significantly improve outcomes for those struggling with addiction or mental health issues, allowing them to address these challenges more effectively.
- Expand Support Services:** Comprehensive support services, including mental health care, substance abuse treatment, job training, and education, are essential. Integrating these services into housing programs can provide a more holistic approach to addressing the underlying causes of homelessness.
- Address Systemic Inequalities:** Tackling racial and economic disparities is crucial. This involves reforming policies that disproportionately affect marginalized communities and ensuring equal access to housing, education, and employment opportunities.
- Community Engagement and Prevention:** Preventing home-



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Making the Invisible Visible...

lessness requires early intervention. Community-based programs that identify and support at-risk individuals and families can prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place. This includes eviction prevention programs, rental assistance, and financial stability through workforce development. Workforce development initiatives can provide individuals with the skills and opportunities needed to achieve sustainable employment and economic self-sufficiency, reducing the risk of homelessness.

Conclusion

The urgency to address homelessness in America cannot be overstated.

ed. Homelessness is a visible manifestation of deeper systemic issues that require comprehensive and compassionate solutions. By increasing affordable housing, adopting the Housing First approach, expanding support services, addressing systemic inequalities, and focusing on prevention, we can begin to make significant strides in reducing homelessness. It is imperative that we shift our perspective to see the invisible and take action to ensure that every individual has a place to call home. The fight against homelessness is not just a battle for housing; it is a fight for dignity, equality, and justice for all.

By Michael Cupeles
FRIENDS PAC Member

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Welcome Home! Tiny Strategies Build Stability for Teens

No longer just a trend for minimalists and millennials, tiny homes—which are typically under 400 square feet—stand out as a promising affordable housing strategy as a key tool to preventing chronic homelessness and for youth aging out of foster care. According to a brief prepared by Child Trends¹ in partnership with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Initiative, foster youth and former foster youth face daunting challenges as they navigate the transition to independence, with some of the most significant hurdles being the cost of living and the lack of affordable housing options. Barriers include eligibility requirements and program rules that make it difficult to access or maintain housing, high cost of living, and challenges navigating housing vouchers.

Tiny home communities are seeking to prevent young people from falling through the cracks by providing stable shelter and a sense of community bundled with education in life skills, counseling, transportation and job training while also partnering with local child abuse prevention agencies. According to the West Virginia Data Dashboard, 37.5% of the children currently in state custody in Barbour County, WV are 13 years of age or older and have limited resources to support them when they age out of

system. New Vision, a nonprofit, located in Barbour County aims to address the lack of housing by creating a community of 24 single occupancy tiny homes designed to support young men ages 18-25 who are aging out of the foster care system. This upstream solution is an attempt to help young men in transition to adulthood by developing employability skills, offering mentorship and providing housing in a safe environment. In addition, the Barbour County Family Support Center located nearby serves as a connecting point for families needing housing assistance as well as New Vision Village residents who may utilize their universally available essential resources such as the food pantry, school supply distribution, family fun activities and programming.

Tiny homes, as a prevention strategy, can offer stability and security in addition to proximity to essential resources and support systems. In Oklahoma, Pivot, A Turning Point for Youth, has a significant initiative aimed at providing afford-

able housing for youth, particularly those facing homelessness or aging out of the foster care system. Pivot's Tiny Home Community project broke ground on the first tiny homes in 2018 through a grant from Impact Oklahoma. Currently, they are opening 15 new tiny homes, along with a new community center, through a grant from Oklahoma Human Services focusing on sheltering youth who have aged out of the foster care system.

Annette Wisk Jacobi, Executive Director of Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, describes the vital *continued on page 5*



Photo courtesy of New Vision Village.



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Welcome Home!

role tiny homes can play in improving outcomes for youth. "Providing stable housing through initiatives like Pivot's tiny homes is crucial for breaking the cycle of homelessness and offering young people a strong foundation for a better future. Investing in prevention services is key to ensuring that youth aging out of foster care have access to the necessary resources, significantly reducing their risk of homelessness and fostering the development of essential life skills. These tiny homes go beyond merely offering shelter; they create a nurturing community where young people can flourish. By prioritizing prevention, we tackle the root causes of homelessness among foster youth, giving them the opportunity to escape the cycle of instability."

Tiny homes offer an alternative approach—one that balances practical needs with compassion. In addition to building community, they contribute to the ongoing conversation about how we can better address youth homelessness. Although

small in size, tiny homes offer a large opportunity for the youth to experience security, pride and responsibility.

By MaryJo Alimena Caruso
FRIENDS T/TA Coordinator

Reference:

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Resource:

The West Virginia Department of Health Child Welfare Dashboard. Child Welfare Dashboard (wv.gov). An interactive statewide and county specific dashboard detailing child welfare information by county that is updated monthly.



Photo courtesy of New Vision Village.

HUD's Collaborative Efforts to Prevent Family Evictions and Combat Homelessness

The Biden-Harris Administration's recent award of \$3.16 billion in homelessness assistance funding marks a historic investment in combating homelessness across the United States. This funding, allocated through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Continuum of Care program, supports over 7,000 projects aimed at providing both housing assistance and essential supportive services to individuals experiencing homelessness. The initiative prioritizes vulnerable populations, including survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, with dedicated funds for new projects and the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program. HUD Secretary Marcia L. Fudge emphasized the critical role of these funds in expanding community capacity to offer stable housing and necessary services, reinforcing the Administration's commitment to addressing homelessness with proven solutions, and enhancing support

for underserved populations.

For American families, this substantial funding boost will have significant positive impacts. The expanded resources will facilitate better access to permanent housing and supportive services, reducing the immediate risk of homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families. The focus on underserved communities, including rural areas and victims of domestic violence, ensures a broader and more inclusive approach to tackling homelessness. Additionally, by integrating local partnerships and emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, the Continuum of Care program fosters community-wide efforts to provide sustainable solutions. This initiative, alongside complementary measures like the Eviction Protection Grant Program, reflects a comprehensive strategy to enhance housing stability, prevent homelessness, and support low-income families facing housing crises, ultimately contributing to more secure and resilient

communities nationwide.

By Ashley Schmit
FRIENDS PAC Member

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The McKinney-Vento Act & the Education for Homeless Children & Youth Program

Homelessness in the United States has been increasing since 2017, and it is recognized as an urgent public health issue and humanitarian crisis. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), homelessness affects cities, suburbs, and rural areas across every state. Housing is considered a social determinant of health, meaning that the lack of stable housing negatively impacts overall health and life expectancy.

People experiencing homelessness often face numerous health challenges, including higher rates of chronic mental and physical health conditions. The dangerous conditions of living without housing can lead to a significantly reduced life expectancy, with many individuals dying nearly 30 years earlier than the average American². Additionally, homelessness exacerbates existing health disparities and creates barriers to accessing healthcare and other essential services³. Efforts to address homelessness must consider these health impacts and work towards providing stable housing solutions, improving access to healthcare, and addressing the root causes of homelessness, such as economic inequality and inadequate social safety nets⁴.

The National Center on Family Homelessness has reported that “A staggering 2.5 million children are now homeless each year in America. This historic high represents one in every 30 children in the United States.”

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a landmark federal law in the United States, first enacted in 1987, was the first significant federal legislative response to homelessness. In a brief developed by the National Center for Homeless Education, the National Association for the Education of Children and Youth, and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, several rights and responsibilities under the McKinney-Vento Act were highlighted. This act provides federal funding for home shelter programs and has key components for homeless children and youth.⁵ The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program ensures that children experiencing

homelessness have equal access to education.

Some of the protections afforded under this program include and but are not limited to:

- States must describe in their state McKinney-Vento plan how students in homeless situations are or will be given the opportunity to meet the same challenging state academic achievement standards all students are expected to meet. Students in homeless situations must have access to educational and other services they need.
- Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), otherwise known as school districts, must, to the extent feasible, keep students in homeless situations in their school of origin (defined as the school the student attended when permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled), unless it is against the parent's or guardian's wishes.
- Students can continue attending their school of origin the entire time they are homeless and until the end of any academic year in which they move into permanent housing.

Although this landmark program has brought significant aid and relief to individuals experiencing homelessness, it is not without challenges. According to an article written by Peter Michael Miller, “the initial passing and subsequent revisions to McKinney-Vento are depicted as providing numerous benefits for students who are homeless... [however,] its full actualization is seen to be inhibited by several intra- and interorganizational leadership issues at school, community, and state levels.”⁶ Miller asserts that education was a small part of the original McKinney-Vento legislation, and it has taken years of reauthorization to address a comprehensive, feasible, and sustainable method of educated children and youth who experience homelessness. In addition, many people who are designated as a homeless liaison may hold concurrent roles and responsibilities that disallow them from serving this population adequately.

While there are challenges that the McKinney-Vento Act face in service

to the most vulnerable population, an article written by Brendan Chen offers suggestions as to what can strengthen the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. Chen suggests, “engaging community stakeholders to advance knowledge and awareness of the McKinney-Vento Act and its protections, increasing funding to allow school districts and program liaisons to meet their students' needs, and improve[ing] training for school and district officials to ensure compliance with the EHCY Program.”⁷

On the community, state, and federal level, we have a duty to protect citizens from housing insecurity, and this duty is far greater for children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Act and the EHCY Program are two essential aspects of working to eradicate homelessness, and continuous quality improvement for these initiatives should remain one of our highest callings.

By Jo Modeste
FRIENDS PAC Member

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Oregon's Housing Experience

In our great state of Oregon there has been much to debate around addressing our houseless population. Oregon ranks as one of the top five states in the nation with the highest rates of homelessness. During 2023, our governor, Tina Kotek brought swift action upon her arrival to office, declaring homelessness a state of emergency. This dramatic increase of the last four years has many of our programs and politicians debating about how to tackle this issue. Some could point to the increase in rent and housing to explain this being a key part of the issue. In addition, the end of COVID protections had an impact because it served as a buffer for some families who risked being evicted, especially in Oregon's urban areas where there was an increase of families needing to access temporary shelter. Combine that with the lack of open shelter beds available for those looking to find refuge compounded by the current crisis of mental health and addiction.

Fentanyl and opioids continued to circulate throughout the state. The resources that were in use were already stretched to their capacity. With Covid, lockdown restrictions created many barriers for programs who were left understaffed or underfunded. The ability to supply those with treatment or shelter became more difficult.

Oregon continues to find the answers that will help aide in confronting those who need to find housing

options. We have programs such as Project Homeless Connect (PHC) looking to do just that. Located in Hillsboro, Oregon, PHC seeks to aid those who are suffering out on the streets. PHC offers an array of services such as a drop-in center for resources. Resources include a place for people to do laundry, get meals, take showers, find recovery resources and receive dental care. PHC is not only a hub of resources but a path to getting into shelters. Project Homeless Connect provides motel like shelters with 45 bed capacity and private rooms. During extreme weather conditions in the winter and summer PHC provides emergency shelter. In addition, short-term and long-term supportive housing options, which include case management, are offered.

The Housing First Model, is an approach that provides people with housing no matter their struggles. It's a unique approach that might be the answer to Oregon's houseless population. Among the other services that PHC provides are peer mentors who are Certified Recovery Mentors and Peer Support Specialists. It's a one-on-one mentorship that guides individuals who are seeking support, like signing up for programs, connecting to recovery meetings, and coaching with money management or relationship building that help promote life skills. Mentors have been instrumental in providing hope and support to those

who need that in their lives.

As we look at things through the lens of prevention, there are other programs that have sought creative ways to provide shelter for families, prompting investors in Portland to utilize an unused correctional facility to help with shelter space. In 2019, a nonprofit organization, Helping Hands transitioned the former Wapato jail into a 200-bed capacity shelter.

With partnerships within the community, providers can use a referral process to gain access to Bybee Lake Hope Center (BLHC). Providing individuals and families with a low barrier, clean and sober environment along with transitional housing options. There's a 30-day period for people to receive respite from the streets. Hot meals, showers, or rest. BLC takes a trauma informed approach by using lived experienced staff to assist in helping people attain goals with their Helping Hands reentry program. A program that helps with life skills, applying for work, and onsite support groups. A way to wrap around those individuals that need a helping hand.

Another point of focus when it comes to strategies to address the houseless are outdoor shelters. Some shelters have longer wait lists. In 2021, the city of Portland decided to invest in more outdoor shelters. Outdoor shelters were not new to Oregon but the need to curb the overflow of people needing shelter beds was growing. Multnomah Safe Village which is a low barrier setting that allows people to get the support they need but with a more person-centered focus including peer support and other types of case management for adults. These miniature shelters help in transitioning people into more permanent housing. Though some might not agree with this approach which prompted fear from some homeowners who worried about the increase of crime and drugs that might impact their neighborhoods. The City of Portland has created Safe Neighbor Agreements that are intended to hold the villages accountable and make them safe and

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Oregon's Housing Experience

successful for those living inside and around them.

The governor's plan to address homelessness has not been without controversy and Oregon continues to wrestle with the best approach. The debate will continue over where the city's revenue should go. Whether it's funding for treatment or mental health services, the common thread is the need for stable housing. For many of us who work in community and social service fields, we realize that the lack of funding and staff to meet the needs of the people is a challenge. In a perfect world there would be rent that's affordable and resources available to help those when they need it. It would almost seem that in most cases people have to fail before they can get the proper assistance. As we look to the future, it would be hard not to see how these systems all intersect. Whether it's addiction, housing or just receiving rental assistance, the funding and infrastructure needs to



be in place to avoid creating barriers for those who need assistance.

By Matthew Porter
FRIENDS PAC Member

Resources:

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Outdoor Emergency Shelters: Lessons Learned. <https://www.portland.gov/homelessness-impact-reduction/news/2021/5/11/outdoor-emergency-shelters-lessons-learned>. A blog post published by the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program about lessons learned during the pandemic by the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program staff.

Helping Hands Reentry Program. <https://helpinghandsreentry.org/about-us>. A program in Oregon offering trauma-informed, data-driven, person-centered care and services for people experiencing homelessness.



FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council members (from l to r, top row): David Armstrong, Paula Bibbs-Samuels, Ashley Cox, Michael Cupeles, Eileen Graham, Anntoinette Johnson, Melissa Zimmerman, and Vadonna Williams (from l to r, bottom row) Matthew Porter, Elizabeth Reddick, Ashley Schmit, Heather Stenson, , Jo Modeste, Joe Whitmore, and Thalia Wilson.

About the PAC

FRIENDS has established a Parent Advisory Council to provide useful overall program direction and guidance to the activities of the National Center. Council members share their experience and expertise in child abuse prevention and family strengthening through their active participation in FRIENDS workgroups and the annual Grantee's meeting, development/review of FRIENDS written materials, and by providing resource center staff with consultation and advice.

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