

Through the lens of an activist social work professor: Concerns for the rights of people who are experiencing homelessness

INTERVIEW WITH MARY PROVENCE CONDUCTED BY ANDREA COPELAND

Mary Provence, Assistant Teaching Professor of Social Work at Ball State University, shares in this interview her early years of living and working in the city. As part of her graduate studies at IUI, she worked closely with residents who in turn invited her to join their community. Early in her career, she called herself a “street outreach social worker.” Provence currently lives in that same community where she met her husband and volunteered to support youth. After sharing the reasons for launching the ENGAGE! journal, we began our discussion about homelessness and her commitment to effecting change.

Tell us about yourself and how you became interested in (homelessness and unsheltered) concerns?

In 8th grade, I distinctly remember it at the end of every chapter in our health book, it had a highlight of a career, a health-related career, and the the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) had a summary of what social workers do, and I read that. And of course, this was way before the Internet, so I literally wrote a letter and asked them to send me more information on what it meant to be a social worker.

I grew up in rural and small-town Indiana, and I knew that I lived in a place that didn't know these issues and I wanted to know people. And I cared. I cared deeply. I cared deeply about the people that I read about, and it

touched my soul in a great way.

I had my school library, public library, and home bookshelf. Those were the resources that I had, and so I learned the best that I could. The other thing was that my dad supported the Edna Martin Christian Center [in Indianapolis].

We would drive to Indianapolis for different reasons as a family. And I remember being on the interstate and looking down into the urban environment and wondering how do you get there? I don't understand because here I am, a child on the interstate, I'm seeing a place I want to go, that I want to learn about.

My undergraduate was at Taylor University. Taylor had many wonderful leaders that came and spoke to us. Are you familiar with Doctor John Perkins? John Perkins is, oh, he's probably 90 years old by now. But John was a founder of the Christian Community Development Association, and he did a vast amount of community organizing work in Mississippi. He's inspired people around the world to do this type of work. I met him. I've read his books. He's come to my community and multiple leaders like that. I began hearing them at Taylor and the more I heard them speak, I bought their books and read their stories. I'm like, this is exactly what I want to do.

How have you worked with issues facing people who are experiencing homelessness?

My husband and I, along with other community residents, started a community development organization in 2001 that for over a decade worked on the issue of affordable housing. In addition, I, along with other neighborhood women, worked to help women that were experiencing addiction and prostitution.

To back up a bit, in 1998, I became the first social worker on staff of Outreach Inc. In places that most people are afraid to go, and as a team, we worked critically on the issue of youth homelessness. I provided case management and crisis intervention to help youth get off the streets. I helped Outreach's founder open their very first drop-in center. Now Outreach Inc. has a beautiful, gorgeous new building here in the city, and they have lots more funding. They're a very large organization, but back then, we were some renegades, we really were.

And then in 2017 [at IU], I started my PhD program and was told 'Mary, you're going to be working with Dr. Beth Wahler, and you're going to be doing a needs assessment of the Indianapolis Public Library.' And I just grinned from ear to ear because I recognized that it encompassed everything that was important to me. When I was younger, I used to take my kids to the central public library, and I would see people experiencing homelessness. In fact, that was one of my stops years before when I was an outreach worker. I would meet kids down at the public library. So I had been there for years. And I'm like, 'the library needs a social worker.'

But even before I began the PhD program, I was teaching as an adjunct. One semester, I taught the very last case management class of the certificate program that no longer exists in the [IU School of Social Work]. Provence discussed placements in the community with organizations and individuals as part of this class. One person that she worked with was Maurice Young who was not affiliated with a formal agency; however, the school allowed her to place a student with him.

Mr. Young, a longtime advocate for the homeless community in Indianapolis, described himself as 'homeless by design.'

They [Mr. Young and the student] met at the public library. So again, this is pre any of the research that I did. This was all in the background of my life when I walked into the PhD program and was told I would be helping conduct a needs assessment at the Indianapolis Public Library.

What have you learned that may be applicable for advocates who want to effect change in the systems that are impacting homelessness?

First of all, we need to decrease the barriers to service. Sometimes agencies will have a rule that you have to prove that you're experiencing homelessness. So that's a barrier, you have to show up, maybe at a certain time or follow a certain protocol in order to get services or you have to have an ID. There are all these rules that you have to follow and a lot of times people experiencing homelessness simply can't follow: 'Well, my phone ran out of charge. I didn't know what time it was. I don't have money for a bus fare to get there on time. The police raided the camp and they took my birth certificate. I don't have the paperwork to get an ID.'

Honestly, as a social work profession generally, we haven't always done a good job about keeping those barriers low, but social work at the library is very organic. It's new, and I hope that as we formalize it in the profession, I hope we don't damage it. I really want to protect and preserve that organic nature of library social work because people can literally just walk in and ask for what they need.

As I have interviewed library social workers in my research, they tell me that when the client comes in and says, 'I need XY and Z.' OK, well, that's what they do. If they haven't done it before, they figure it out. There are almost no limitations to what a library social worker can assist with to break down those barriers (Provence, 2022). The library is so accessible because it's already in a place where people experiencing homelessness are naturally.

We also need to decrease barriers to increase accessibility. We really desperately need more daytime full-service drop-in centers. There are almost no drop-in centers in most places. That's one of many reasons why the libraries have so many daily patrons experiencing homelessness.

We need more daytime drop-in centers with full services and no need to prove that you're experiencing homelessness. But just 'hey, I'm walking in. I need to use the shower. I need to use the bathroom. I'd like to have a place to get my mail. I'd like to have a storage place. I'd like to meet with the social worker. I need to see the doctor. I need some legal help.' Very, very few cities have them, and the ones that do, there aren't enough of them. I'd say what the general public does not understand about homeless shelters is that they are often closed down during the day. You almost always cannot stay at the shelter during the day, so now you're back out on the street. Where are you supposed to go? Well, with the criminalization of homelessness and no daytime shelters, of course, they're going to end up at the library. You can sit in Steak and Shake only so long, or White Castle. They're not going to let you sit there all day long, even if you do buy a cup of coffee. At some point, their hospitality is going to run out.

We also need a statewide bill for persons experiencing homelessness. And in fact, this has been done before. Puerto Rico in 1998 was the first territory to enact a Bill of Rights. And then Rhode Island was the first state that did it (Rankin, 2015).

Typically, they're called a Homeless Bill of Rights, but Homeless Bill of Rights does not reflect person first language, so I'd love to see it renamed a Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness or some other kind of life-giving name. A statewide Bill of Rights would do several things, one, it would hopefully deter localities from continuing to criminalize homelessness. It would also need to have teeth in it for legal enforcement. It also would need to affirm the existing rights that people have (Rankin, 2015).

For example, it would prevent police harassment in public spaces, and also protect the privacy of the person experiencing homelessness from search and seizure. Just

because your stuff is in a public place doesn't mean the police should have the right to automatically grab your stuff, throw it away or search.

Related to advocacy, how can community members who are experiencing homelessness advocate for themselves and others?

The whole idea of thinking about people who are experiencing homelessness and being advocates for themselves is challenging. If people are in survival mode, they can't spend a whole lot of time being an advocate for change.

Criminalization is at issue for many who are experiencing homelessness how might we safeguard the agency of individuals who are experiencing homelessness?

Criminalizing homelessness is incredibly expensive. It's also very dangerous because what it does is it pushes people farther and farther out to more and more remote places where they can't access services.

If you look up what happened with Maurice's camp when it was destroyed. All that stuff was dumped. Literally dumped. Yes, I know we now have an ordinance here in Indianapolis, but if you read the language carefully there are loopholes in it that it's pretty easy for peoples' stuff to get destroyed. It says they have to store it for 60 days. Well, if you're experiencing homelessness, you may face many obstacles to getting it back. What are you going to do after 60 days? It's most likely going to be destroyed.

Now your insulin is gone. Let's say you had your birth certificate in your tent. Now it's gone. If you were to lose your housing today, what would be the items you would take? The things you could just not live without. You take your birth certificate, you take your Social Security card, you would take your medications, your toothbrush, your underwear.

When you think about the criminalization of homelessness and the destroying of camps, those are the things that go missing.

There is an economic vulnerability that impacts so many people and the high costs and substantial increase in the cost of housing. Is economics the biggest problem? What else is at issue?

The underlying issue of why we don't have enough affordable housing, why we have the criminalization of homelessness, all of it, is dehumanization. We don't view people that are in extreme poverty as human as much as we view ourselves as human. We don't look at their feelings, their emotions, their values, their life story, their experiences.

Instead, we other them into the label, 'the homeless.' You're now 'homeless,' and in that moment, they lose their face. They lose their agency; they lose their feelings. We can then justify treating them in ways that are less than how we would want to be treated.

If we really care about people in the United States, we can eradicate homelessness. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the U.S. is short 7.4 million units of affordable housing (Aurand et al., 2022). We need to build that affordable housing—and not for 60% of the area median income. I think instead of basing affordable housing on the area median income, we need to base it on the federal poverty guideline.

We really need to build affordable housing for the lowest of the low-income folks. We need to have low-income housing that a person on Social Security can afford without having to live in squalor. We have some of that housing, but there's not enough. If anybody's paid any attention at the library, much of the population of people experiencing homelessness are our grandmothers and our grandfathers. It is a travesty and an insult to the United States that we are letting our older adults live on the street.

You can build tiny homes; you can do mixed-income housing. You can do more Section 8 vouchers. There are so many things that you can do that are a better use of our money than criminalization.

Then next comes economics. We don't have a living wage. You can look at the MIT living wage (<https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/18>) calculator and for a family of four, two working adults and two kids in Indianapolis,

you need to have both working parents each earning \$22.40 an hour to make it.

We don't have a living wage. We need to get a living wage. We need more affordable housing, more Section 8 vouchers. We need to understand that SNAP and TANF do not meet the gap between minimum wage and a living wage. Still, you cannot reach the cost of affordable housing. We need a lot more mental health treatment. We need a lot more substance abuse treatment.

This is my own personal bent, but there's a lot of research evidence to back it up.

References

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