

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 10 Colleen Murphy

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SPEAKERS

Host: Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins

Guest: Colleen Murphy

[00:00] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Welcome to Doing What Works, Innovations in Homeless Services, the podcast that takes a closer look at one of our community's most urgent challenges. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins, Interim Associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Each episode, we'll engage with experts, policymakers, and educators to uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change.

[00:24] Joining us on the podcast today is someone who has spent the last 12 years working in the homeless services sector, but it's not where she started. First working in the international health sector, she was able to use those skills to help identify sustainable and lasting solutions to homelessness. She has a bachelor's degree in international relations from James Madison University in my home state of Virginia, and a postgraduate diploma in epidemiology from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

[00:52] Currently, she is a principal on the Homeless Solutions team of Lessar Development Consultants, an organization whose mission is to end the

housing affordability crisis and homelessness. Colleen Murphy, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Colleen Murphy: Thank you for having me.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Our first question for everyone on our Doing What Works podcast is always the same. What was your first job ever and how does what you learned in that position inform Doing What Works for you in your current role?

[01:21] **Colleen Murphy:** It was many moons ago, but I was 15 years old and got the great idea to see if I could get a work permit to work at a national pizza delivery chain answering phones. And, you know, we were quote unquote called the phone girls. And I noticed pretty early on, even at a young age that.

[01:45] The world in which I was working, it was very gendered and that women were only phone worthy. And it was the men who did delivery and the pizza making. And so I started to ask the question, well, why? And so got all of us 15 year olds on the pizza delivery line or the pizza making line and started to kind of crash, break through those glass.

[02:13] glass ceilings in a small scale.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Wow. Phone girl is what we're calling. Very fascinating. So advocacy seems to be in your blood from a very, very early age, right?

Colleen Murphy: It appears so.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: As I mentioned earlier, you are currently a principal on the Homeless Solutions team at Lazar Development Consultants, and you helped pull together a labor market report on the homeless services sector called Strengthening LA County's Homeless Services Workforce. Can you share a bit of an overview of that report and what inspired this study in the first place?

[02:46] **Colleen Murphy:** Yeah, it was such a labor of love to work on this report. We were approached by Santa Monica College about the need to develop a report and to see if that was something within our wheelhouse. And we jumped at the opportunity and really was lucky to be asked to do it. So Santa Monica College put together a really great group of experts to help put together what this report should look like, what the goals are to explore.

[03:15] Priorities, areas of focus to help review a survey that we did of the workforce and just really help guide the process to hopefully be able to illustrate not only the needs that are out there in L.A. County and frankly beyond,

but then some of the solutions and the really exciting things that Santa Monica College is doing around really training the workforce. And we couldn't be more pleased to be part of this.

[03:42] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins** : The report notes a significant mismatch between the supply of trained workers and the growing demand in the homeless services sector. What are some of the root causes of this gap?

Colleen Murphy: Yes, it's such an important gap. And I think the report, I hope it helps to illustrate what many of them are. I think first and foremost, I think the average person probably doesn't say, hey, I want to work in homeless services to start with. We are seeing a lot of people with lived experience be interested in the sector, which is really exciting. But I think for the...

[04:21] those without that experience, it might not be on their radar. So I think there's awareness issue. I think there's also a lot of stigma out there. I think a lot of people are not aware that homelessness has solutions and there's things that we can do. I know when I joined the sector, you know, now it's almost 13 years that... Yeah, I didn't know the solutions. I thought maybe we just handed out bottles of water and checked on people. But, you know, I learned pretty quickly that you can get people back into housing and back to health and wellness. And so I think that's part of it, too, is we have a real opportunity to help people understand what this work looks like.

[05:00] And I think it's a wage issue. Los Angeles County is a very expensive place to live. And the studies show that you have to earn far more than the wages that many of these workers make. So I think it's a wage issue too. And I think it's also...

[05:22] It's a tough job and it's a tough job, not only because the work itself, but because the broader community may not honor it and value it. And so I think we have some things to work on, but I think, you know, you can't find solutions until you identify the problems. And I think this report aims to do that. So it really can help entities look at real, real solutions.

[05:45] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins**: You mentioned wages as some of the reasons why the supply and demand isn't necessarily aligned. Entry-level wages into homeless services industry are on the lower side, but there's a real chance of increased wages with career advancement. Can you talk about those opportunities and what they look like within the field and how wages can impact who enters and who even stays in the sector?

[06:07] **Colleen Murphy**: Absolutely. So I wouldn't say necessarily impacts who enters, but I think it definitely impacts who stays. So I think there's two things we need to think about. So I think we need career progression and we need programs like Santa Monica College's certificate

program to help people with those skills so they can move up. But then we need to backfill that position. So we need both things. We need to attract strong individuals who are driven.

[06:36] and have the skills and then have appropriate ways to move them up through the ladder. And I think what we've seen is there's not a common... threshold of wages. So there's a lot of jumping around to agencies. And, you know, there's people jumping from agency A to agency B, see people moving to the government sector, because wages or benefits could be higher. So I think what we're seeing is a lot of movement of people, but not necessarily attraction of new people. And so we really need a system that is able to do both of move people up.

[07:15] Speaker : And also within the same agency, too. I think what's happening, too, is people are moving up but moving into other entities. And so then there's a leadership gap within that agency, too. So it's really all interdependent in terms of inflow and progression.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You just talked about the skills part of this whole piece of the puzzle. You know, according to your findings, what are the most in-demand competencies or skills in this field and how well are current training programs aligned with those needs?

Colleen Murphy: Such a great question. You know, the work that people doing this who work in the homeless sector, it's they need to know a lot of things. If we think about outreach workers, they not only need to know safety and mental health first aid, but they also need to know every single system of care that someone who's living on the streets may need. So that means mental health, substance use disorder.

[08:12] public benefits, getting an ID, and none of these systems are designed to be easy. Just going to the DMV can be an all-day experience for one person. And so when you think about the scale and the number of things somebody needs to know, and so joining this workforce. Learning all those things is really hard. And a lot of times you're in a role and you're shadowing, but there's no formal training that exists. And I think the community-based organizations who do this important work, they're also busy running programs. And so doing the training on top of it in a formal way is something everybody wants, but just the bandwidth is really challenged. I know we would do a new outreach worker bootcamp.

[08:58] up twice a year, but the amount of work it took for us and it took us away from the other work. So having entities like community college take that on so agencies can focus on the work and still do the trainings that they need to do at an agency level, but having a place for people to go and come to the sector

trained is such an exciting idea.

[09:22] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Let's talk a little bit more about kind of that training piece, that educational pathway piece. The report outlines educational pathways and entry points into the field. As we've already discussed, Santa Monica College has that homeless services certificate program that's really aimed at training frontline workers. For someone interested in breaking into this sector, what does a viable and a sustainable career path look like?

Colleen Murphy: Yeah, I think I've seen a lot of people.

[09:49] you know, start as an outreach worker or shelter staff or even sometimes an administration. And through some luck and through some advocacy, I've seen people then move into supervisorial positions. Then often, if they're lucky, it might be then a director position. And so I've definitely seen many, many people move up through the ranks. But I think there's...

[10:17] tends to be no rhyme or reason of what that may look like. Sometimes it is just somebody leaves and you're filling that gap. And so this also gives the certificate program gives people an opportunity to have credentials that can be used to help to standardize who gets picked to promote and giving people really that skills. So when they do promote up, that they are ready to go, that they know how to use Excel, for example, or they know how to manage people, there's a lot of things that.

[10:54] You know, I'm excited for the future for programs like Santa Monica colleges where it can look at leadership level training also.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You spoke earlier about kind of the challenges of retention. You know, it's grueling work. It's a lot of work. It can be heavy. It can be mentally heavy as well. Workforce retention in homeless services, it's going to be a challenge.

[11:17] You work in the sector. You know how taxing it can be. Based on your data, what are some of the key factors driving turnover and what can be done to improve retention?

Colleen Murphy: I think there's a few key things, I think, as we start out with having livable wages. Absolutely critical. Having training to handle this work at all levels is really important. A lot of times people have really good intentions to do this work, but if they don't have the skills to do it, it's really tough. I think there's an opportunity to have more mental health support for frontline staff because...

[11:57] accessing therapists in the healthcare system can be tough. So

having some care, I think too, funders play a role too. I think there's an opportunity to really honor frontline workers because I think some entities may look at this work as charity work, but it's...

[12:20] It's a professional position. It's a tough position. And so I think honoring as such is really important too. And if we're all looking at it as such, I think we definitely can move the needle to keep people in those positions. And of course, ensuring there is good career trajectories throughout the time. I was lucky that I came in in a managerial position because I was older and did experience, but took a lot of opportunity to be with the frontline staff. So I think having management be out there on the front lines often really helps you keep a pulse on what's going on. And then you can advocate for the resources that you need for your frontline teams. And that keeps...

[13:06] everyone really feeling how tough it is. And I think it helped me a lot to be able to say to those in positions of decision-making positions to advocate, we need X, this is important, and just always advocate for that.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I feel like it's important to note that none of this work happens in a vacuum, right? So how does this report tie the workforce development side of homeless services to broader equity and justice goals in Los Angeles County?

Colleen Murphy: Yeah, equity is really, really important. You know, one of the findings that we saw in our survey was that we saw that people who identified from BIPOC populations had a different experience in their training experience...

[13:55] reported that it was much poorer than their white counterparts. And so I think understanding that more, making sure that we're looking at how people view training programs and look at is there some sort of racial bias and training materials.

[14:17] how we train, what time we train, right? Because people, if we're doing after hours trainings and people have to take care of their families, you know, it's a lot of structural things that we have to look at because it's not a one size fit all. And so understanding what people need in terms of their training and looking at any racial, gender, or any orientation to see.

[14:42] how we can do better and be more inclusive in our training approaches.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I think it's easy sometimes to focus on all of the challenges and the hardships and how difficult the work is. But I want to kind of also look at the other side of that. You yourself obviously have been in this sector for quite a while. What keeps you showing up day to day to continue to do this work?

[15:08] **Colleen Murphy:** Yeah, I was a few minutes late to this podcast because we're working on helping five people move into permanent supportive housing in a few weeks. And just thinking about people being able to sleep in a bed with their own keys and being able to move to that next step. It never gets old. Housing is a human right. And it's something that I take very seriously.

[15:37] Knowing that we can help one person keeps me going and it keeps a lot of us going and not losing sight on what we're trying to do here and the joy. And there's a lot of heartache in this work, but there's also a lot of joy. The people I've met who are unsheltered, you know, have been some of the kindest, warmest people. I remember when I broke my ankle a few years ago.

[16:02] And I was out doing outreach and crutches and a cane. And the house community kind of just looked at me a little funny most of the time when I was out. But when I was doing outreach, my homeless neighbors would be so kind and be like, what are you doing out here? You should be resting. And the kindness that I saw and see every day is something that I think a lot of people aren't aware of. And, you know, I do it for them.

[16:32] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** who are saying to themselves, yes, this work is hard, but it's worth it. And so anything worthwhile doing is going to be hard. So I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. Is that kind of how you feel?

Colleen Murphy: Absolutely. And I think we have to look at why it's hard. We say that a lot, but people assume it's what makes it hard is the client level.

[16:51] But what makes it hard is we're working in a system that's very scarcity based. And so we're trying to help people. But the example I often think of is imagine you're trying to build a house and you need a bulldozer to dig up the space, but you're given a spoon instead. And sometimes this work feels like that. It feels like we don't have the tools to do it. So that's grueling because you want to help people, but you have to tell them.

[17:20] There is no housing today. There is no shelter today. Everything takes a long time. And so I think that's hard. I think just the vitriol on this issue that people misunderstand and think of as a public safety issue and look at it, they focus on what is perceived as personal failures of people and not understanding the structural failures. So I think...

[17:45] that creates a space where people don't feel valued doing this work. And so I think the burnout, I've heard outreach workers be yelled at by people driving by and saying unkind words. So I think we have a lot that we can do to make this a safer space and a more constructive space. And things like...

[18:08] Really great training programs to help with all this important work is an important piece. And I think we all have an opportunity to see what part we can do to make their lives a little easier and that we can help more people.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You really are working within a system that really pushes against you at every avenue that you're trying to push these solutions forward. So I can only imagine how, you know, that in and of itself can make the work feel.

[18:38] harder than it maybe needs to be, right?

Colleen Murphy: Absolutely.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You know, I mentioned, we've mentioned a couple of times about SMC's Homeless Services Program, their certificate program. The first cohort just graduated this past spring, which is fantastic. Where do you see the biggest opportunity for community colleges, especially Santa Monica College, to step in and support workforce development in this sector?

[19:02] **Colleen Murphy:** Yeah, I remember the day I read the first newspaper article about this program, and I was smiling ear to ear, being like, this is a long time coming and so appreciative of Santa Monica College stepping up to do this. And, you know, the faculty they have are the best of the best and people who I have trained from. And so I think it's so important. I think it just can scale up, not only at Santa Monica College of more people,

[19:32] more areas of education, looking at different modalities of training, of looking at different pieces of the sector, not only different levels, but also, you know, a shelter staff person, their skills that they need is going to be different than somebody who's in permanent housing, which is going to be different than outreach, but also you have admin staff too. So I think there's opportunities to get people who are interested to learn about

[20:02] budgeting and all the fun stuff that keeps these organizations going. And so I think, you know, what Santa Monica College is really, you know, creating a mold that others can learn about. You know, I live very close to a community college up here in Santa Barbara County. And, you know, I hope that.

[20:22] colleges like that take this on too, because there's a huge workforce need up here too. And being able to do that assistance, I know it's a completely scalable approach that every city and county is dealing with workforce shortages in the sector. So I'm so excited. Anything I can do to support it, I'm here for it, as the kids say.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: In a dream state, no red lights in front of you.

What's one policy change or investment?

[20:51] that you think would best support the homeless services workforce? And an even bigger question, do you think we can end homelessness in our lifetime?

Colleen Murphy: Oh, gosh. It's hard to think about one investment. Homelessness is many subsystems that are needed. But I will say...

[21:12] Investing in scalable training is such a big piece because the number of people that are needed to do this work throughout the country is huge. And so the scale of need for training and retention is huge. So I think philanthropy, government can all play a role in investing in training much of the...

[21:38] The funds that are out there, while so important, do not include training components. And so thinking about how that can be funded and creating those systems of care for the workers, I think, is a really great start. But I'll also take a lot of permanent housing. I'll take prevention. I'll take, you know, just public awareness campaigns, too, if I can throw in some other ideas.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Do you think we can end homelessness in our lifetime?

[22:06] **Colleen Murphy:** We know what it will take to do it. I think it's the political will. And it's funding it on a scale that is needed. I think there's a huge opportunity to look at how to prevent homelessness because we're doing quite a good job of housing people who enter into homelessness. But for every person we house, two more people become homeless. And so we really have to start looking there.

[22:36] The homeless services system is designed to be a band-aid. It's a crisis response, but we can't continue to do it on the scale. And so we have to look at systems of care upstream, whether it's medical, whether it's housing of how to keep people stable. I've worked on a program recently where we had very flexible funds to keep people housed and intensive case management attached to it. And not one person in our cohort fell out of housing because of a pretty limit, a very modest investment. But it does take those resources and looking hard in the mirror of what it's really going to take.

23:19 **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** That prevention piece, I think, is a piece that a lot of people may not think about, right? It's not necessarily just the being reactive to the issue. It's how do you prevent it in the first place so that you then don't have to react to it.

Colleen Murphy: Absolutely. And if you don't have affordable housing, it's so easy to fall into homelessness. I think of a woman we helped recently who had sickle cell anemia.

23:46 And so it was really hard for her to work. And she was in a market rate apartment with her daughter. And so every month she was having to call into work because her sickle cell would flare up and then that would. packed her income. And so she was really struggling to keep housed because of her medical issues. And so she was doing everything right, but just her health was really getting in the way. And it's such a tough, tough condition to live comfortably. And so yeah, it's there's, for every story like that, there's millions others of people who are struggling and need some extra help. And it's such a good investment.

24:29 **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I encourage everyone to read this workforce labor report that you worked on as it comes out, hopefully soon. Colleen Murphy, thank you so much for sharing your insights and expertise with us. And thank you for joining us on Doing What Works, Innovations in Homeless Services. We hope today's conversation has shed light on the complexities of homelessness and inspired ideas for change. If you found value in this episode, please subscribe, share, and leave us a review. Together, we can continue the dialogue and support the efforts to create lasting solutions.

24:59 Stay tuned for more insights from the experts leading the way. Until next time.