

Students' research helps housing coalition peer through lens of homeless

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It's a photograph capturing what many might consider a rather unremarkable, if not bleak, vista.

The sun sets on a frozen College Avenue in Appleton. Snow and slush are piled up on a railroad overpass's slim shoulder (for many, a sidewalk). It's cold and icy, and the idea of traversing the high-traffic bridge on foot doesn't exactly scream "safe." Yet, it's one path some homeless or "housing-insecure" people in the Fox Valley take to get to the Fox Valley Warming Shelter.

What may be most remarkable about the picture is who was asked to capture it.

A team of 10 University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students, charged by the Fox Cities Housing Coalition (FCHC) with researching the barriers, challenges and "gaps in services" homeless and housing-insecure people face in accessing housing, gave several FCHC clients cameras. They were asked to use a research technique called "photo elicitation" to, from their vantage, snap pictures of obstacles they face in securing housing. The current and former clients were also asked to capture images of the things that have "been helpful during your time seeking secure housing."

There were no grades nor was there compensation in play for the UW Oshkosh student researchers. They volunteered their time hoping to give FCHC some new perspectives while they, as undergraduates, had the opportunity to drive a community-based research project.

"We ran into many stereotypical impressions of why people are homeless, how the stigmatization of being homeless causes even this vulnerable population themselves to hide the problem, or attempt to, in our society," said Diane Escher, a 2014 UW Oshkosh graduate and one of the sociology majors involved in the research.

On June 18, the UW Oshkosh sociology and social work researchers presented their findings to members of the FCHC and closed the book on a research partnership and experience that was incredibly valuable for the undergraduate students.

"In sociology, we preach and try our best to practice public sociology, or applying our sociological imagination and skills to projects that will have a tangible positive impact upon the communities in which we find ourselves," said UW Oshkosh sociology professor Paul Van Auken, one of the students' research mentors. "Conducting research for a community organization that has an authentic need for good information about a problem, like homelessness and the services designed to address the situation, that is so inherently sociological, interesting and important. Clearly, it fits the bill."

Van Auken's students collaborated with UW Oshkosh social work professor James Brown's students.

Brown said the research project was hatched after he talked with a student who was doing her field placement at a homeless shelter. The FCHC was looking for some help. Brown forwarded the message along to social work students and quickly requested Van Auken and his sociology students join in the process.

The research preparation and work took more than a year, Brown said, and featured both qualitative and quantitative components. The quantitative looked at service providers' beliefs about services they are providing. The qualitative portion used participant's own photos to better understand barriers that are keeping them from securing housing, what services are most helpful and what daily life is like for someone living this reality.

After the photo elicitation was completed, student researchers paired in pairs to interview clients about their pictures. They transcribed the confidential interviews and "coded them looking for patterns," Brown said. An additional online survey of FCHC employees and managers helped researchers identify "ways to have more effective collaborations," he said.

"Sometimes there is mission creep with agencies beginning to overlap their services, and then, sometimes, some services aren't available," he said.

Student researcher Michelle Maiman said before the project began, her peers sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) research training and approval. The IRB wanted to know the "who, what, when, why, where, how" of the homelessness study and its design.

"Although our plan that was designed not to cause harm, there were some unintentional harm that could have been created..." Maiman said. "Once IRB submitted it back to us with concerns, we, as a team, had to address their concerns, one by one, on how we could protect the population from intentional and unintentional harm. That took some time, meeting, coming up with plans and processes. Some of their concerns had to do with individuals who have a diagnosed mental illness or those who did not speak English. So, we addressed some of those barriers in addition to others, and then we got the green light."

Jerome Martin, executive director of the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley, said his agency embarks on a "gaps analysis" about every three to five years. In 2012, they began planning for a new examination, aiming to launch it in 2013.

"The one thing we hadn't done before is really look at the client's perspective – we hadn't looked through their lens," Martin said in a video interview captured as part of the students' research documentation.

A UW Oshkosh intern with the Emergency Shelter suggested tapping fellow students and professors to tackle the research work. Martin said the no-cost, reliable, quality option was mutually beneficial to both the Housing Coalition and the students. It was a perfect fit.

"We're getting a very good perspective of how (clients) view our services, how they view our access to services, our continuum of care's capacity to serve people," Martin said. "So far, the results that have

been produced are very interesting and very informative.”

Martin said some of the resulting interviews cast a spotlight on misconceptions clients have about services. And that led to a realization that “we need to do a better job of educating our clients as to how and where to access services and what service are actually available for them.”

Escher said the research opened their eyes as to the maze many homeless and housing-insecure people have to navigate to receive services. It’s something agencies are often aware of and continually work together to address.

“Agencies can be vast bureaucracies that are slow to change,” she said.

“It really provided an awareness of the homelessness problem so we can be better advocates as social workers,” said student researcher and 2014 graduate Beka Bartel.

Van Auken said the experience the student researchers gained is and will be invaluable for students’ “development and life after college.”

“They are likely to become further motivated to work for social justice, which is a benefit to the entire community,” Van Auken said, lauding the win-win of the collaborative research project.

“The (FCHC) organization receives good information, the participants -- those who the students surveyed and interviewed -- have an opportunity to provide feedback and are given some voice through which to tell their own story, which can be very powerful, and we professors benefit by building new community partnerships and experiencing the joy of seeing our students' good work in action.”

Learn more:

- [UW Oshkosh Department of Social Work](#)
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