

A HISTORY OF PICTURE THE HOMELESS

Picture the Homeless was created by two homeless men in the Fall of 1999, Anthony Williams and Lewis Haggins. Both were homeless when Nicole Barrett was injured with a brick on the streets of New York. All homeless, African American men immediately became targets, and the impact was felt by all homeless people as the Giuliani administration used this tragedy as an excuse to harass and intimidate homeless people on the streets and in the shelters. The media contributed to an environment where an isolated criminal act became the pretext to stigmatize and harass people based on their lack of housing. Headlines demonizing homeless people appeared, even before the alleged perpetrator was apprehended and his housing status made public. One of the worst examples, from the *New York Daily News*, declared: "The Get Those Violent Crazies Off The Street!"

The mass arrests, pre dawn shelter raids and demonization of homeless people by the media were gross violations of our civil rights and had to be confronted. Millions of dollars were pouring into NYC each year to fuel a service industry but homeless was increasing. Picture the Homeless was founded on the principle that the voices and leadership of homeless people is critical to educate the public and mobilize the political will to target resources in the struggle to end homelessness.

The co-founders of Picture the Homeless began reaching out to allies for support, a place to meet and to figure out strategies to create an organization of homeless people that could carry out this work. In January 2000, Picture the Homeless held its first organizing meeting at CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center. Lynn Lewis, a grass roots activist was at that first meeting and joined with Anthony and Lewis to help build an organization led by homeless people. Key allies from our early months were CHARAS, Judson Memorial Church and WBAI Radio. We held our first vigil protesting the forced displacement of homeless people to Camp LaGuardia in upstate New York on the steps of Judson Memorial Church, and we were welcomed by WBAI to tell our story on the radio.

We began participating in the NYC Continuum of Care Planning Process in April of 2000 after attending a public hearing to identify spending priorities for HUD Homeless Assistance funds. Anthony opened the door for other homeless people in NYC to participate in that process, learning about how funding for housing and services for homeless people is allocated and challenging the city and service providers in attendance. Other homeless people joined Picture the Homeless through street and shelter based outreach, the Continuum of Care planning process, and our early actions. An obstacle to organizing was the lack of office space to use as a base so that homeless people could find and join us.

The North Star Fund provided Picture the Homeless with our first grant with Judson serving as fiscal sponsor. Judson Memorial Church offered Picture the Homeless office space, which we moved into in March of 2001. We have been holding weekly organizing meetings, continuing outreach, gaining skills, developing leaders and building ally support on the local and national levels since that time to develop and build our organizational capacity to affect systemic change.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Conducted 24 hour vigil to protest upstate exile of homeless men on the steps of Judson Church;
- Organized Homeless Against the Amadou Diallo Verdict Rally linking police brutality against people of color and homeless people;
- Co-sponsored May Day for the Homeless Rally, with the National Action Network, receiving endorsements from local and national organizations fighting for housing and civil rights;
- Organized a March on 125th St to protest gentrification of Harlem and development of “so called affordable” housing;
- Protested the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) selling out poor communities to Private for Profit Developers, demanding that vacant, city owned building be rehabilitated for very low income people;
- Protested closing of Kingsbridge Women's Shelter, called for 1 year housing subsidy for homeless women instead of transferring them to another shelter;
- Were the first homeless participants in the NYC Continuum of Care planning process which determined how \$84 Million of HUD funding for services and housing was allocated in 2000;
- Created training materials for homeless people about HUD funding processes;
- Educated 100 to 125 homeless people about HUD funding processes and how to impact funding priorities for the use of Federal HUD funds;
- Won recognition of the expertise of homeless people in the Continuum of Care Process by securing a commitment from the Coalition Steering Committee to pay homeless participants \$10.00 an hour;
- Conducted public education activities, including publishing newspaper articles, public speaking engagements, appearing on WBAI Wake Up Call, WBAI in Exile; WLIB and other radio stations;
- Opened an office to build organizational power, provide homeless people with meeting space and have resources and equipment available such as a computer, fax machine and phone;
- Launched a web site www.picturethehomeless.org
- Attended the International Street Newspaper Association Conference in Canada, July 2000 and San Francisco in 2001, The National Organizers Alliance Gathering in June, 2001, the International Poor People’s Summit in Mexico City, 2000, and the National Hunger and Homeless Awareness Week;
- Documented cases of police brutality in conjunction with the National Coalition for the Homeless Civil Rights Workgroup/National Homeless Civil Rights Organizing Project.

CURRENT PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

Picture the Homeless is an emerging grass roots organization led by people who are homeless. Because our goal is to end homelessness our work is multi issue. Our primary focus is ensuring the participation of homeless people in the public policy decision making processes that impact their lives, civil rights work, living wages and income supports indexed to the cost of housing. Our strategies include grass roots organizing, documentation of civil rights violations, outreach,

public education, political education, public policy work, collaboration with other grass roots efforts led by homeless people, and coalition work.

Grass Roots Organizing: Activities include weekly meetings at Judson Memorial Church, and outreach to members and other homeless people in parks, soup kitchens, and shelters. Members have networks of people who they stay in contact with, inviting people to meetings and actions, but also taking information to people where they are, asking for input and bringing in this work from the street to each organizing meeting. Attendance at meetings is not a prerequisite for your voice to be heard.

Leadership Development: New members are quickly oriented to our organizational goals and identify areas that they want to work on, some consistently participate and quickly move into leadership roles. Training is provided as members identify needs such as funding, organizing, planning actions, sweat equity housing development and public education. Members are encouraged to participate in direct actions and other public events as soon as they join.

Political Education Several members have taken a leadership role in the NYC Continuum of Care Planning Process. Members have attended Mayoral Candidate Forums, leafleting and working to ensure that the candidates commit to ending homelessness, and have attended workshops and conferences.

Public Education: Members have spoken in dozens of public speaking venues, have just launched our website www.picturethehomeless.org with labor donated by volunteers. Members have made inquiries into training through our local cable public access affiliate Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN).

Building Ally Relationships: Among our key allies are Judson Memorial Church, Charas/El Bohio Cultural and Community Center, The Anti Displacement Coalition, Met Council on Housing, Urban Justice Center, AIDS Housing Network, The Employment Project, Community Voices Heard, National Association of Street Newspapers, National Coalition for the Homeless, San Francisco Coalition for the Homeless, and the National Action Network.

National Civil Rights Organizing Project (NHCROP): Police brutality and harassment were the primary reasons behind the founding of Picture the Homeless. Members have joined with people in other communities for training and support to expose the harassment of homeless people. We have participated in the development of a national survey tool for outreach to document civil rights violations by the police and city workers. We were instrumental in ensuring that this survey tool is written in layman's terms so that homeless people themselves can carry out outreach activities.

CONSTITUENCY

Our constituency is people who are homeless. NYC is experiencing record numbers of homeless people in shelter. The point in time number of homeless families in city shelters at 6,252, including 11,594 children, a 31% increase over the same time 1 year ago. The total shelter census (on a single night) in March 2001 reached 26,226. These numbers do not include

unsheltered homeless people who are not counted by or included in NYC homeless statistics, nor do they include people living in Transitional or Permanent Supportive Housing funded by Homeless Assistance funds, people doubled up, or in jail who were homeless prior to arrest, often for offenses such as sleeping on the sidewalk and who will be released from jail to return to homelessness, or homeless people currently on psychiatric or detox units with no housing upon discharge.

Homelessness cuts across all racial, ethnic, gender, family composition, age, and sexual orientation demographics. What homeless people have in common is extreme poverty and even when working, do not earn enough to obtain housing. Disabilities, such as chronic mental illness, chemical addiction and chronic health problems such as HIV/AIDS, and TB are more prevalent among people who are homeless than the general population.

Picture the Homeless is led and directed by homeless people. Members gain the skills and knowledge to impact public policy decisions and the service system and develop courses of action that move the public discourse on homelessness. Members who do not consistently participate in meetings benefit from learning about their rights and having a connection with other homeless people fighting to make systemic changes. Real solutions to homelessness benefits both homeless and housed people. New members are often surprised at having a place to go to express their ideas, develop and carry out direct actions, build organizing and communication skills and have a chance to educate the public about homelessness.

Organizational Relationships

Picture the Homeless has developed working relationships with Judson Memorial Church and CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center. Judson is our fiscal sponsor, providing us with free office and meeting space, supporting our efforts at building an organization. CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center provides us with free meeting space to hold teach-ins and planning meetings with homeless people to educate them about the HUD funding process and elicit their opinions on how that funding should be spent. Prior to obtaining our office space, we received mail and phone messages at CHARAS, and used the phone and fax machines at both Judson and CHARAS. We receive critical technical support from both Judson and CHARAS as we talk through issues such as organization building, racism, gentrification and how to bring our message to the public at large.

Picture the Homeless is a member of the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH). Lynn Lewis is a Board member of NCH, she and Anthony Williams both sit on the Civil Rights Workgroup, and Lynn participates in the Economic Justice Workgroup and Grass Roots Organizing Committee. Picture the Homeless has begun actively documenting civil rights abuses of homeless people in conjunction with the National Civil Rights Organizing Project. Picture the Homeless also sits on the NYC Continuum of Care Coalition Planning Committee which will determine how Millions in HUD funding for homeless New Yorkers will be spent on an annual basis. Picture the Homeless are members of the National Organizers Alliance.