

Charity or Justice?

“Charity offends almost no one;
at one point or another,
justice offends practically everyone.”
– David Hilfiker

Outreach workers are in a unique position to advocate authentically and powerfully on behalf of people experiencing homelessness. The experience of doing outreach work generates compelling first-hand observations, anecdotes, and analyses that beg to be imparted to a broader audience, especially to decision-makers from supervisors to legislators. Just as it is essential in outreach to listen to people’s stories, so it is imperative to “tell the story” of homelessness to the broader human community in which we live.

Outreach and advocacy are inseparable activities. Outreach itself is advocacy in action. Outreach workers are particularly skilled and experienced in “calling out for and on behalf of” individuals experiencing homelessness. But how far are we to take advocacy? Do we dare challenge the conditions and policies that deprive whole groups of people of health and home? Do we have the courage to call out for justice in our social structures, while still helping to restore what is broken in the lives of the individuals for whom we care?

Providers who work with homeless people encounter an uneasy tension concerning the difference between doing “charity” and “justice.” David Hilfiker (“The Limits of Charity” in *The Other Side* magazine, September and October 2000) describes this tension as such: “Justice has to do with fairness, with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. Charity has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people’s good will and can be withdrawn whenever they choose.”

Hilfiker argues that charity must be viewed as a limited response. It may be a necessary response in our current situation, but it is not enough. Charitable organizations, including government-sponsored programs, provide important services and care but are rightly seen as a “safety net” – not the *solution* to the concerns of poverty and homelessness.

Hilfiker argues that “charity does little to change the wider social and political systems that sustain injustice.” Instead, charity “acts out” inequality. It maintains the system of “we who are the givers and *they* who are the receivers.” It does not address the fundamental conditions of injustice – the inevitable result of the structures of our society – that are at the root of poverty and homelessness.

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