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The Blight of Homelessness Must Be Addressed With a Dignified Approach

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Since 2010 people in every continent have come to observe World Homeless Day on 10th October in various ways to "draw attention to homeless people's needs locally and provide opportunities for the community to get involved in responding to homelessness." The situation is getting worse year on year.

Homelessness is not only limited to poor and developing countries, but its effect is being felt across the developed countries - financially and socially.

Here in the UK, speaking with people who have had the unfortunate experience of being homeless has highlighted one major theme - being homeless has little to do with race, religion or education. It can happen to those with the strongest of faith or with the best of education. All it takes is for circumstances, usually which are out of an individual's control, to change and that, in turn, can place a person's life into a negative spiral. The line between a normal life with stability and a shelter and that of chaos-filled unpredictable life is very thin. Rental rate increases, unexpected redundancies, divorce and family breakdown are examples of some of the causes that can strike even the most prepared at any time.

Homelessness in London is getting worse because of rising house prices in London and the south-east. The housing and homeless charity, Shelter, warned that "as the rising cost of living and cuts to the housing safety net continued to take their toll, many more parents were likely to find themselves facing an ongoing struggle to keep a roof over their children's heads."

The number of rough sleepers rose by six per cent in England in 2013 and by 13 per cent in London, according to a report by the charities Crisis and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). "The number of homeless people is rising sharply under the twin pressures of the shortage of housing and the impact of the Government's welfare reforms", the report claimed.

While the number of homeless people is growing more and more, due to the austerity cuts affecting our economy, the number of charities that are equipped to deal with the problem is dwindling.

Newham in East London, one of the most deprived local authorities in the country, has witnessed the closure of many of its homeless shelters. During 2009-10, Newham had over 36,000 households on the Housing Register (applying for a place in social housing) and around 3,500 households in temporary accommodation.

However one award winning charity in Newham, Caritas Anchor House (CAH), is trying to buck this trend with their motto of love (caritas, a Latin word, means love). They have announced the expansion of the residences they provide to accommodate more homeless people. What makes this charity stand out is the continuous support and education they provide to their residents in order to get them back into work. At the end of the day it is about individuals that need to stand on his or her feet.

CAH is not just helping the homeless, but also it gets them into work with professionalism and human touch to make them self sufficient. Each year, it welcomes up to 220 single homeless adults, aged 20-60 years, through its doors who have had nowhere to live; it also provides them with training, education and support services to more than 1000 community members each year.

People arrive at CAH in varying degrees of anxiety, despair, depression and shock. They are referred by other agencies (e.g. the local authority, the Probationary service, other homeless agencies, and so on).

Many of CAH residents have experienced varying levels of social exclusion; for some, this means lacking any family support. Experiencing this kind of isolation can lead into a spiral of abuse in many cases through alcohol, drugs and crime. CAH offers people who have become deeply isolated through homelessness, mental health issues, other illness or disability a route to independence either through employment or other sustainable long term support.

Its 'Home and Hope Appeal' has generated millions of pounds over the last few years. CAH wants people "to move out of homelessness for good, equipped with the life-skills and abilities to sustain independent living."

My involvement with CAH and the work it is doing is borne out of my passionate commitment to support deprived people of the East End through my community works as well as in educational sectors since 1980's.

Many people tend to avoid homeless people at all cost, as if they carried some contagious disease and that they are a different species. But everyone should be aware that the gap between a normal stable life and a chaotic one is very thin. As Jeremy Paxman, veteran broadcaster said at the CAH-organised World Homeless Day in the House of Lords, "Do we discriminate just because we are comfortable and have a roof over our heads? We need to breakout from stereotypes and help find solutions."

Shelter is one of the immediate 'basic needs' like food and clothing for human beings. It is admirable people of faith are leading on this sector, but in the midst of uncertain economic and chaotic social situation we need people from all backgrounds to join this campaign of eradicating homelessness.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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