



FIRSTHAND Homeless

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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Before Viewing

About *Firsthand: Homeless*

Firsthand: Homeless is part of WTTW's award-winning *Firsthand* multiplatform, multiyear initiative focusing on the firsthand perspectives of people facing critical issues in Chicago. Through their individual *Firsthand* documentary stories, Yolanda, Kimberly, Dan, Brian, and Jackie share with candor and vulnerability their challenges of daily survival living unhoused in Chicago. While systemic barriers remain and often stand in the way of securing stable housing, our storytellers challenge our assumptions, inform and educate, enrich our lives, seek to improve our society, and share their hope for a better future.

However, *Firsthand: Homeless* does not offer simple solutions to this complex problem. The stories reveal generational trauma, mental health issues, substance abuse, and the reality that becoming unhoused is never a result of "just one thing." Homelessness is one of those topics that can leave Americans despairing, as it demonstrates what should be obvious: a wealthy society doesn't have to accept as inevitable throngs of people sleeping on sidewalks or under bridges. *Firsthand: Homeless* invites viewers to listen and learn from the experiences of others to expand understanding and learn from the community leaders and organizations committed to finding stable housing for every member of their communities.



The audience looks on during the filming of the *Firsthand: Homeless* Talks at the WTTW Studios in Chicago.

Using This Guide

This discussion guide supports viewers and facilitators in connecting with the WTTW *Firsthand: Homeless* series through a personalized reflective learning process. The purpose of the *Firsthand* project is to put a human face on the issue of being unhoused in Chicago today by prioritizing the firsthand perspectives both of individuals experiencing homelessness and of community organizations and leaders working to provide permanent, stable housing and livelihoods.

For moderators using the documentary for community conversations, this guide can help shape the parameters of a post-screening conversation by establishing respectful and inclusive spaces where lived experiences are shared. It also provides opportunities to inform and empower audiences to engage in dialogue on the crisis of homelessness and mental health in our nation to think responsively about next steps in each of our communities.

With *Firsthand: Homeless* screenings and conversations, we hope to

- **highlight the humanity** and dignity of all people – unhoused or housed;
- **shift negative and punitive mindsets** directed toward people experiencing homelessness;
- **erase stigmas** surrounding people experiencing homelessness in order to increase empathy and compassion;
- make it clear that **homelessness is a public health crisis** and that housing is a human right;
- continue efforts to **decriminalize poverty and mental illness**;
- emphasize that solving homelessness occurs through a **community-wide approach** that prioritizes quick access to housing, which is the foundation from which people can begin setting and working toward goals that will help with long-term housing stability;
- use the stories in *Firsthand* as a point of departure to discuss, support, and strengthen proven approaches to end homelessness and provide support services to maintain and **restore basic humanity to all**.

Suggested Formats for Community Screenings

The *Firsthand: Homeless* series are first-person documentary shorts produced and available to inform, inspire, and empower communities to work towards a systemic, solutions-based approach to homelessness. The five stories of individuals experiencing homelessness and the talks from organizational leaders, some of whom have lived experience with being unhoused, are a powerful way to connect audiences to issues in their communities.

As you know your audience and setting best, the format for watching one, two, or all of the stories is in your hands. We highly encourage you to watch the participant stories and the talks prior to any event to prepare you to moderate meaningful post-screening conversations.

Screening + Q & A Session

Share background content and pre-screening questions provided in this guide with your audience prior to watching the stories, then lead an audience Q & A session.

Screening + Panel

Open your event by sharing background content and the pre-screening questions provided in this guide. After your screening, host a panel with *Firsthand* participants (if available), or invite representatives from local organizations for a panel conversation and Q & A session with your audience.

Screening + Workshop

Focus your outreach on one of the themes organized in this guide and screen one or more of the stories that illuminate this topic. Use and adapt the questions created for the theme as a basis for a panel discussion or more informal Q & A sessions with your audience.

Checklist and Timeline

A screening event is a powerful opportunity to unite the community to raise awareness and inspire compassionate action. Follow this suggested schedule to prepare for a successful event.

Two Months Prior

- Set a time, date, and location. Ensure that the location is accessible for everyone.
- Build an outreach list of organizations and secure partnerships for the event.
- Decide on the formats for your screening and post-screening conversation.
- Brainstorm potential panelists for a post-screening conversation.

One Month Prior

- Send out invitations with the time, date, location, RSVP details, and a description of the film and post-screening conversation.
- If hosting a panel, ensure speakers are familiar with the film and clear about your expectations for the post-screening conversation.
- Contact community partners to confirm time for set up and participation.

Day(s) Before

- Send reminders to guests and speakers.
- Test all equipment at the site, both video and audio.
- Assemble any promotional materials and remind partners to bring materials for informational tables.

Day of Screening

- Arrive at least an hour early. This allows enough time to set up the room, test all equipment, greet guests and panelists, and review your agenda.

Day After the Event

- Send a note of appreciation to all guests who attended and include any follow-up activities.
- Open up opportunities to stay connected and share ideas for taking future actions after viewing the film.

Tips for Facilitating Conversations

Spotlight Dignity and Humanity: It is important to start with the premise that no one chooses to be unhoused.

Practice Self-Care: Watch the entire series and read through this guide in advance of your event, paying attention to your own emotional responses and experiences and talking them through with a trusted friend or colleague beforehand so you feel supported in the process.

Set Expectations: State the purpose of your event clearly, so that your screening audience knows what to expect with regard to the topic and purpose of the event.

Build a Sense of Community: Watching this series together is a meaningful way to bring people together for a shared experience and to build community. *Firsthand* stories are an invitation to have a conversation. It does not present one solution or point of view; rather, it offers an opportunity to hear the stories of individuals and families working to survive.

Create Group Norms: Before you begin, set some group agreements for dialogue. Remind audiences that they will have different personal experiences with housing and to stay open to learning from one another. Norms such as paying attention to how much or how little you are speaking, listening with the intent to understand, and not interrupting can ensure all voices feel welcome to share.

Allow Space for Emotion: Audience members may have an emotional response to the series; some may even be moved to share their own experiences. Validate the emotions that you hear, thank the person for sharing their story, and where appropriate, let audience members know that you have community resources available, as needed. After a few moments of acknowledgment, advise the group to take a deep breath together and move forward with the conversation.

Share Your Story: As a moderator and as an organizer, your responsibility is to set the tone for your gathering. It can be conveyed through your own story or by sharing why you organized this event. This personal touch can often open up the space for others to feel comfortable and to share more readily.

Create a Space for Multiple Perspectives: There may be many points of view on how best to end the crisis of affordable housing. With diverse perspectives, it's essential to bring openness and curiosity to these nuanced and complicated conversations.

Pay Attention to Language: Because of heavy social and cultural stigma around being homeless, it will be helpful to avoid generalizations and share preferred terms with your audience. Remind your group to use person-first language when discussing this issue (a person or people experiencing homelessness, not a homeless person, or a person with a mental illness or addiction, not a mentally ill person or an addict).

Be Aware of Fatigue: The issues surrounding poverty, domestic violence, intergenerational trauma, and sexual violence are all very difficult and part of the dynamic of housing. For younger activists, it is particularly important to acknowledge the toll this work can take and make an effort to promote self-care. Create opportunities for reflection, celebration, and time for oneself. When you find yourself feeling that your efforts and energy are not making the difference you are seeking, take some time away to recharge and renew your commitment.

Make Your Space Inclusive: Ask for RSVPs for your event that include any special needs. In this way, you can prepare your space and screening so that it is inclusive of people with any physical or environmental needs, such as child care, closed captions or language interpretation, and accessible doors and seating.

Incorporate a Content Warning: The stories of individuals who have experienced homelessness can be emotionally difficult and potentially triggering. It is important to open your screening by acknowledging the sensitive nature of the content. Here is one way to do so: “*Firsthand: Homeless* contains discussions and sharing of sensitive content, including suicide, trauma, and economic insecurity. Please take care of yourself and support one another with this in mind.”

Make Mental Health Support Services Visible: We recommend inviting local organizations to your screening. If they are unavailable, please remind your audience that mental health support is available and share these national resources or highlight local organizations.

- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)
- SAMHSA’s National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. Also visit the online treatment locator, or send your zip code via text message to 435748 (HELP4U) to find help near you.
- For veterans and others managing PTSD, the [National Center for PTSD](#) may offer the types of support necessary to address the unique challenges being faced.



Nicole Bahena, Vice President of Community Partnerships at All Chicago, visits with the audience after her *Firsthand* Talk “Building Our Way Out.”

Recommendations for Speaking to the Public About Homelessness¹

Making A Human Connection Is Key: Emphasizing ways in which people who are housed and people who are homeless share the same struggles and hopes provides an on-ramp to empathy.

Avoid Reinforcing Stigma And Myths: Addressing public concerns about addiction and mental illness are important, but too much focus can reinforce misconceptions.

Uplift Voices With Lived Experience: People who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness are often the best ambassadors. Don't just tell people's stories, support them in speaking for themselves.

Be Specific: The most memorable stories leave the audience with a specific takeaway about the person or experience described.

When Possible, Make It Interactive: The public is often confused about homelessness, so allow space for questions and discussion.

Understand Your Audience: Messages need to take the audience into account. Try to identify what preconceptions people bring to a conversation and let that inform your message.

Collaborate, Don't Reinvent The Wheel: Homelessness is a systemic problem, and numerous individuals and organizations are working to solve it. Uplift other voices, highlight good examples, and build on the approaches they're already taking.

Give People Easy Ways To Get Involved: Meeting and talking with someone experiencing homelessness is a fast way to create a moment of empathy. Help people find accessible opportunities to reach out to unhoused members of their community.

1 https://invisiblepeople.tv/2020research/What_America_Believes_About_Homelessness_IP.pdf, p. 45.

Background Information

Open your event by sharing this background information and engaging in an informal conversation. This can help frame the event, enrich and inform participants, build community, and help you, as a moderator, have a sense of who is in the room.

A helpful reference for the most up-to-date data is the yearly [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#) (AHAR) to Congress. Between 2022 and 2023 the report found the following:

- People experiencing homelessness increased nationwide by 12 percent between 2022 and 2023.
- People who identify as Black, African American, or African, as well as Indigenous people (including Native Americans and Pacific Islanders), continue to be overrepresented among the population experiencing homelessness.
- There was a 40 percent increase in people experiencing homelessness who identify as Asian or Asian American, with the largest numerical increase among people who identify as Hispanic or Latino.
- The number of veterans experiencing homelessness increased by 7 percent. There was a 14-percent rise in the number of unsheltered veterans and a 3-percent increase in the number of sheltered veterans.
- About one-third of all individuals experiencing homelessness reported having experienced chronic patterns of homelessness. This is the highest rate since the point-in-time count (PIT) began in 2007.²

2 Point-in-time (PIT) counts are unduplicated one-night estimates of both sheltered and unsheltered populations experiencing homelessness. The one-night counts are conducted by continuums of care nationwide and occur during the last week in January of each year.



Sharday Hamilton, Youth Board Fellow at the National Runaway Safeline, presents her *Firsthand* Talk "Finding a Way Home."

Terminology³

Individual experiencing chronic homelessness: an individual who has been continuously homeless for one year or more or who has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years where the combined length of time homeless on those occasions is at least 12 months

Continuums of care (CoC): local planning bodies responsible for coordinating the full range of homelessness services in a geographic area, which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or an entire state

Disability: one or more of the following conditions: (A) a physical, mental, or emotional impairment, including an impairment caused by alcohol or drug abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, or brain injury that (1) is expected to be long-continuing or of indefinite duration; (2) substantially impedes the individual's ability to live independently; and (3) could be improved by the provision of more suitable housing conditions; (B) a developmental disability, as defined in Section 102 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. 15002); or (C) the disease of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) or any condition arising from the etiologic agency for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

Emergency shelter (ES): a facility with the primary purpose of providing temporary shelter for people experiencing homelessness

Experiencing homelessness: a person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence

Permanent supportive housing (PSH): a housing model designed to provide housing assistance (project- and tenant-based) and supportive services on a long-term basis to people who formerly experienced homelessness. HUD's Continuum of Care program, authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act, funds PSH and requires that the client have a disability for eligibility.

Rapid re-housing (RRH): a housing model designed to provide temporary housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness, moving them quickly out of homelessness and into permanent housing

Transitional housing (TH) programs: provide people experiencing homelessness a place to stay combined with supportive services for up to 24 months (also referred to in *Firsthand* as a transitional living program)

Unsheltered homeless: people whose primary nighttime location is a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for people (for example, the streets, vehicles, or parks)

"Unhoused" is another term used by housing advocates to describe instability in housing. Like other terms that are no longer used, such as homeless, even the term "a person experiencing homelessness" can be seen as a pejorative. The goal is always to be respectful, not dehumanizing, and to avoid generalizations. In this guide, "unhoused" and "experiencing homelessness" are used in various ways. When "homeless" was used by an organization or used in a definition, the language was not changed.

3 Adapted from the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#).

A Historical Framework

It is irresponsible to discuss housing policy in the United States without acknowledging our nation's history of land theft and the disproportionate allocation of resources to white populations. Access to land and land ownership, stable housing, and home ownership are deeply intertwined with the history of structural and institutional racism in America and the inadequacy of the current social safety net.

Recognizing and acknowledging this history are important and necessary steps for redress and for dismantling the most enduring misconceptions about who has stable housing and who does not.

1607 – 1880s

Land theft by colonial settlers on Native American lands; transatlantic slave trade and enslavement of Blacks; growing industrialization and urbanization.

[The Treaty of Chicago of 1833](#) removed the majority of Native Americans from Chicago, with many relocated to Wisconsin.

1880s – 1970s

The Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to escape racial terror following the Civil War, the end of Reconstruction, and Jim Crow laws.

1930s – Present

The U.S. Federal Housing Administration policy of redlining refused to insure mortgages in and around Black neighborhoods.

1940s – 1950s

The U.S. government, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), passed [The Urban Indian Relocation Act of 1948](#). Starting in 1953 and continuing through the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of them and their families were forced to move to cities such as Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Seattle in an effort to force Native peoples to assimilate

into mainstream culture. This policy ended government support of tribes and the protected trust status of all Native-owned lands.

1960s – Present

Mass incarceration of disproportionately Black, Latino, and Native populations, resulting in the disruption of family stability.

1980s – Present

“The 1980s was really the beginning of homelessness as we now know it, mainly because of rising income inequality and the dismantling of a lot of social programs like public housing.”⁴

Gentrification of cities, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, high unemployment rate, HIV/AIDS epidemic, inadequate supply of affordable housing, cuts to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), recession of U.S. economy⁵.

1990s – Present

The Housing First movement begins in 1992 at the nonprofit Pathways to Housing. It became clear that access to immediate independent housing with support services was welcomed by most unhoused individuals.

See [A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America](#) for a more extensive survey of the connections between race and homelessness.⁶

4 Sam Tsemberis, [99% Invisible Podcast, Chapter 3: Housing First](#)

5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519584/>

6 <https://community.solutions/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Brief-Timeline-of-Race-and-Homelessness-in-America-March-2019.pdf>

Addressing Misconceptions⁷

The large majority of people experiencing homelessness in a given area are either from the community in which they are experiencing homelessness or had been living there for multiple years before losing their housing. Overall, migration from low-income to high-income areas has dramatically decreased. In fact, low-income individuals are actually moving out of high-income areas because of high housing costs.

The relationship between homelessness, mental illness, and substance use disorders is complex, with many people experiencing homelessness having neither.

- Most estimates indicate that under half of the overall population experiencing homelessness is affected by these conditions. HUD reports that 21 percent of those experiencing homelessness in 2022 had a severe mental illness and 16 percent reported chronic substance abuse.⁸
- Mental health conditions and substance use disorders can frequently be outcomes of experiencing homelessness.⁹

Homelessness is not a choice. Many people experiencing homelessness are employed or actively seeking employment and would move inside if housing responsive to their needs was available.

- Becoming unhoused usually occurs in response to some sort of crisis.
- The loss of housing usually happens within close relationships and relationship disruption combined with the lack of economic choices. The large majority of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness lack an alternative option that feels safe and stable.
- The experience of being unhoused includes all sorts of victimization, exposure to the elements, and the indignities of living your private life in public.
- Most people exit the experience of being unhoused, often with the support of community programs, government assistance, and family support.

7 https://community.solutions/research-posts/the-truth-about-homelessness/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA7OqrBhD9ARIsAK3UXh-14Q2r5WTK1F6gejikz_ES7ZdEw5wCh3a2OnWN4ArfigfyYQR8CZQEaArE8EALw_wcB

8 <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>

9 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25566947/>

Causes of Homelessness

[The National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) identifies five leading causes:

- 1. Lack of affordable housing for low-income people:** Without options, people face eviction, instability, and become unhoused.
- 2. Economic insecurity:** Low-income households often do not earn enough to take care of all their basic needs – food, clothing, transportation, and housing. It is generally accepted that low-income households should spend no more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs in order to have sufficient income for other needs.
- 3. Health problems:** Health problems can cause a person to experience homelessness and be detrimentally affected by being unhoused and unsheltered.
 - People who experience chronic homelessness live 30 years less, on average, than other Americans.¹⁰
 - Not having access to a shower has been found to be one of the most humiliating aspects of homelessness and a factor in potential ill health.
 - Behavioral health in youth is complex. Depression, exposure to violence or trauma, and the lack of positive social support systems can contribute to health problems.¹¹
- 4. Escaping violence:** Many become unhoused when leaving an abusive relationship.
 - [The National Center for Children in Poverty](#) reports that according to multiple studies examining the causes of homelessness, among mothers with children experiencing homelessness, more than 80 percent had previously experienced domestic violence.¹²
 - Between 22 percent and 57 percent of all homeless women report that domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness.¹³
- 5. Racial disparities:** Most minority groups in the U.S. experience homelessness at disproportionately higher rates due to historic and ongoing systemic racism, including segregation and rental housing discrimination, incarceration disparities, and access to quality of health care.¹⁴

10 <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/vision-housing-security-health-and-opportunity>

11 http://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/text_888.pdf

12 http://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/text_888.pdf, p. 5.

13 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/fact-sheet/domestic-violence-and-homelessness-statistics-2016>

14 <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/inequality/>

The Local Lens: Homeless in Chicago

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless 2023 [report](#) estimates the following¹⁵:

- In 2021, 68,440 people experienced homelessness in Chicago, an increase of 2,829 persons from the previous year.
- Eighty-two percent of people experiencing homelessness are people of color identifying as Black, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native, and multiracial. Twelve percent of people in Chicago experiencing homelessness are white.
- Black and African American Chicagoans comprise 53 percent of all people experiencing homelessness and are more at risk as a result of centuries of racist economic, educational, and housing policies and practices.
- Data for Native American populations who are unhoused in Chicago is difficult to pin down, as they live temporarily with friends and family and are referred to in data sets as “other.” Illinois does not have federally recognized reservations that would provide housing support for Native Americans on reservations.

15 <https://www.chicagohomeless.org/estimate/>



Tent shelters during the winter season in Chicago.

Viewing and Discussing *Firsthand* Series and Talks

Who's Who in *Firsthand: Homeless*

Meet the Participants in *Firsthand: Homeless*.
(Listed alphabetically)

Brian: Brian walked into St. Leonard's Ministries with the goal of leaving homelessness behind him. He's taking advantage of his new life and repairing broken family relationships after years of couch surfing and sleeping in vehicles. Brian is making his voice heard through advocacy work with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. A potential job with the Chicago Transit Authority and permanent housing may be in his near future. (Visual descriptor: Brian is a Black man with short hair and a beard.)

Dan: Dan's journey to homelessness started about 12 years ago after eviction from his suburban home. The streets of downtown Chicago soon became his new home, but navigating life on the streets has been challenging. Avoiding crimes against the homeless, and tackling an on-going heroin addiction are immediate concerns for Dan. (Visual descriptor: Dan is a white man with mid-length hair and is clean shaven.)

Jackie: A mother of three young children, Jackie found herself in need of housing after an altercation with her family. The challenges of being an unhoused mother led her to A Safe Haven. With the organization's help, Jackie can work part time, keep her children in school, and try to live a somewhat normal life. (Visual descriptor: Jackie is a white female that has long hair with green highlights.)



Brian



Dan



Jackie

Kimberly: Twenty-one-year-old Kimberly and her toddler daughter found themselves in Chicago with nowhere to go. Sleeping in shelters, hospital emergency rooms, and cars weren't safe. Knowing her mental health struggles would be intensified by homelessness, Kimberly found help with the assistance of a Chicago transitional housing organization. While she takes the steps to locate permanent housing, Kimberly volunteers in her spare time with a nonprofit to advocate for resources for other homeless youth. (Visual descriptor: Kimberly is a white female with long brown hair with pink highlights.)



Kimberly

Yolanda: For more than 30 years, Yolanda has lived in and around Chicago's Lathrop Homes, but an eviction landed her on the street. Known as "The Auntie" of Lathrop Homes, Yolanda lives in a tent only feet away from the now-abandoned housing development she once called home. Without food and money, and facing the harsh reality of Chicago's brutal cold, Yolanda's desire for housing grows increasingly urgent. (Visual descriptor: Yolanda is a Black woman with short hair who at times uses a walker to assist her mobility.)



Yolanda

Firsthand Talks

Through the lens of personal experiences, four expert talks offer insight, historical context, and possible solutions:

Nicole Bahena

Vice President, Community Partnerships, All Chicago
"Building Our Way Out"

Nicole Bahena is deeply committed to supporting the work of partners on the frontlines of ending homelessness. Having worked to combat homelessness in Chicago and across the country for more than 15 years, Bahena currently works at All Chicago Making Homelessness History where she oversees teams that lead homeless prevention, landlord outreach and engagement, new homeless program funding, and housing program coordination efforts. (Visual Descriptor: Nicole Bahena is a white female with shoulder length brown hair.)



Nicole Bahena

Tracy Baim

Co-Founder, Pride Action Tank, Illinois LGBT Chamber of Commerce, and *Windy City Times*

“Tiny Homes, Big Solutions”

Tracy Baim is the co-founder of the Pride Action Tank and the Illinois LGBT Chamber of Commerce, co-founder and owner of the *Windy City Times* Media Group, and the former publisher of the *Chicago Reader*. She received the American Institute of Architects–Chicago Presidential Citation Award in 2016 for her work on tiny homes for the homeless. Baim has received numerous awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from The Chicago Journalists Association and Public Narrative’s Studs Terkel Award and has been recognized by The Night Ministry and the Chicago Headline Club. (Visual Descriptor: Tracy Baim is a white female with short brown hair.)



Tracy Baim

Sharday Hamilton

Youth Board Fellow, National Runaway Safeline

“Finding a Way Home”

Sharday Hamilton is passionate about working as a youth leader in Chicago and strives to help others hear the story of her journey through and beyond homelessness. She is equally passionate about educating youth and young adults to identify and gain access to available resources that she never had a chance to receive. A youth fellow with the National Runaway Safeline, Hamilton is committed to advocacy and to ensuring the voices of other youth and young adults are heard. (Visual Descriptor: Sharday Hamilton is a Black female with shoulder length dark hair.)



Sharday Hamilton

Shelly Tucciarelli

Executive Director, Visionary Ventures

“Invisible No More”

Shelly Tucciarelli has more than 30 years of experience in management, training, administration, and affordable housing development. She is a Native American tribal member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin and owns Turtle Clan Development Services, which provides professional services to increase the supply and quality of housing and economic development in Indian country nationwide. Tucciarelli serves as the Executive Director of the Visionary Ventures NFP Corporation, a Native American nonprofit that advocates for and promotes affordable housing and provides job opportunities and services for Native Americans in the Chicago region. (Visual Descriptor: Shelley Tucciarelli is a Native American female with dark hair.)



Shelly Tucciarelli

Pre-Screening Discussion Questions

Before any screening of *Firsthand: Homeless*, choose one or more of these framing questions to help set the stage for a meaningful post-screening conversation, discussion, and engagement with important themes, Q & A exchange, or panel conversation.

- As a nation, whom does America allow to become unhoused?
- What are the first words that come to mind when you think about individuals or families experiencing homelessness?
- Black Americans are five times more likely and Native Americans are four times more likely to experience homelessness than white Americans.¹⁶ What do these statistics reveal about the relationship between land ownership, our nation's history, and current social safety net policies?
- Why are certain populations disproportionately impacted by homelessness?
- What historical events and/or political and economic policies contributed to and continue to fuel the increasing homeless population in the United States?

16 <https://community.solutions/the-challenge/>



A Q&A with the four expert speakers: Tracy Baim, Nicole Bahena, Shelly Tucciarelli, and Sharday Hamilton

Post-Screening Discussion Questions

There is a great deal to learn from the lived experiences observed on film and shared directly by *Firsthand* storytellers. New insights, often difficult to hear and know about, sit alongside moments of joy, kindness, and love. These glimpses into our shared humanity are important steps for breaking down fear and misconceptions of individuals and families who are unhoused and is a big step in shifting mindsets and moving towards more humane policies that dignify housing for all.

Take a moment to reflect on all the stories shared, discuss as a group, and learn from one another.

- What shared experiences connect these different stories?
- What differences emerged?
- What new questions did the participants' stories or the talks bring to the surface?
- What new or surprising information did you learn?
- What solutions did you see or do you believe are achievable?
- Across *Firsthand: Homeless* stories, we see the central role of the caseworker in helping to navigate support services and housing. What questions do you have about this role? What did you observe about how they work to support individual needs and the needs of families?

Themes for Diving Deeper

Don Berwick, founder of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement ([IHI](#)), argues that health care and education are sectors that need to be looked at as systems. The “first law of improvement,” Berwick says, is that “every system is perfectly designed to achieve exactly the result it gets. Simply urging individuals to do better will not make them better.”¹⁷

In this section, we invite audiences to dig a bit deeper in their conversations and analysis with Berwick’s animating analysis in mind. Think of housing as an interdependent system such as health care and education and when failures occur, such as becoming unhoused, it is a system breakdown and system failure, not a result of a personal failure. To “solve” homelessness, then, what must occur is to address the fractured systems often passed along over generations?

The stories captured in *Firsthand* offer insights for everyone to see the human costs and magnitude of what occurs when housing instability exacerbates the failures of these systems. For the purposes of discussion, we have grouped certain stories around particular themes, but in reality, Kimberly, Yolanda, Dan, Jackie, and Brian’s stories and the *Firsthand* Talks can be applied and explored through each of these themes. We invite moderators and audiences to make their own connections.

17 <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/learning-from-healthcares-use-of-improvement-science/>

Homelessness Is a Housing Problem

“The foundation for a better, safer, and healthier life is housing. Without a home, every other aspect of a person’s life suffers.”¹⁸

—Jeff Olivet, Executive Director, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)

Participants: Brian, Dan, Jackie

Talks: Nicole Bahena, Tracy Baim

Discussion Question

Jackie lives with two of her three children in temporary housing while also working part time as a bus driver at the University of Chicago. Her priority is to be a stable mother to her children, but securing stable housing for her family remains uncertain. Despite applying for an apartment under rapid re-housing, she and her children continue to live in the shelter.

- What does her story reveal about the systemic barriers facing families experiencing homelessness?

Brian’s story illuminates the foundational role of stable permanent housing in someone’s overall well-being and long-term success. As a formerly incarcerated individual, he shares, “Stable housing provides the opportunity for individuals to build a stable life, step by step. Remember, it took years to mess up my life, so it will take years to rebuild it. When you are homeless you are surviving – there is not much room to live.”

- What new insights about homelessness does Brian’s story reveal?

Dan is someone who has lived on the streets of Chicago for 13 years. At the end of Dan’s story he gets a call from his caseworker that he has the opportunity to secure stable housing. He shares, “Once I get the apartment, I can close that chapter and worry about what’s ahead of me: become a productive member of society again and move on.” Discuss this reflection after Dan’s many years of living on the streets of Chicago.

- How does Dan’s story offer you hope? How would you describe the challenges Dan faces, and what supports are helping him reach his next steps?

18 <https://www.usich.gov/news-events/news/inequity-all-too-clear-chicago-usich-visits-illinois>

Addressing Generational Trauma

Participants: Dan, Jackie, Yolanda

Talks: Shelly Tucciarelli

Discussion Questions

An [adverse childhood experience \(ACE\)](#) describes abuse, trauma, or neglect that creates toxic stress in a child's brain and has been linked with physical illness and the development of mental health conditions as an adult. A child who is abused or raised without proper care, connection, and affection has higher risks for substance abuse, severe obesity, depression, suicide, heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

Yolanda and Dan share their history of substance abuse and Jackie shares stories of her mother's addiction and her childhood of housing instability.

- What steps are each of these participants taking to interrupt the cycles of trauma, heal, and move forward in their lives?
- What do you observe about the systems that support their recovery and the ones that remain as barriers?

Yolanda faces many health challenges that are exacerbated by living on the streets for the past two years. She also shares her deep faith and relationship to God that remain a source of solace, as do her hopes and dreams of life with her fiancé.

- How did her story change your perceptions of who experiences homelessness?
- What fears does Yolanda share that are directly related to her being unhoused, and what other resources are necessary to help Yolanda's recovery?

Shelly Tucciarelli's talk makes the connection between being forcibly removed from her ancestors' tribal lands and the reality of generational displacement and dislocation. "There has been a long history of tribal displacement. While in many communities displacement is a threat, for the Native American community, it is a historical fact. We uniquely understand the true meaning of homelessness."

- What do you understand as the connection between land and identity?

Reducing Stigma

“I feel like there is a big stereotype around homeless people. They’re uneducated and not caring about their mental or physical health, or they have just given up on life. I want to keep on going, I want to keep on learning and I’ve worked really hard to prove that. Just because I am homeless doesn’t mean I have given up on everything else. It’s not my fault that I have been through all I have been through and this is what I have to deal with now.”

—Kimberly, *Firsthand* Participant

Participant: Kimberly

Talks: Sharday Hamilton

Discussion Question

Kimberly lives in a transitional living program (TLP) that she describes as “one step up from a shelter” because she can stay there during the day.

- In what ways does this accommodation help her take other steps towards securing permanent stable housing for herself and her daughter Jasmine?
- What challenges does she face living in her TLP as a single mother, and what fears does she express?

At the end of Kimberly’s story, she reflects, “Everything that I have been through I have always wondered why I am going through this. I feel like my purpose is to serve. I know it sounds like an absurd idea, [but] I really want to buy a building and turn that into a place where people can stay.”

- In what ways does this reflection, and her story in general, challenge existing stereotypes you may hold about who is homeless?

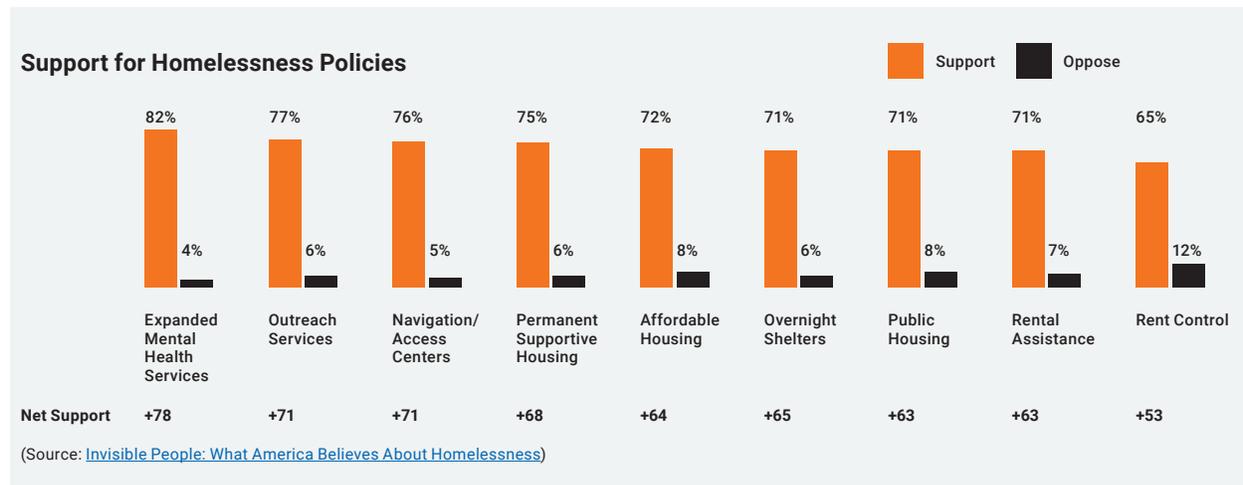
Both Kimberly and Brian use their voice and lived experiences of being unhoused to organize and advocate for change.

- What do we learn about the power of lived experiences to effectively advocate for systemic change in relation to housing?

Consider Solutions

Housing First

In *Firsthand: Homeless*, we witness the constant navigation of individuals and families through systems and programs as they work to secure stable housing.



As this graph shows, there is a wide range of housing options and support services available that affirm a [Housing First](#) approach. Housing First is a homeless assistance approach prioritizing permanent housing even if a person has a substance issue problem. The thinking behind a “housing first” approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities such as food and a place to live before being able to get a job, budget properly, or attend to substance use issues. This approach also prioritizes client agency – the belief that the client’s choice in housing and support services leads to greater success and long-term follow-through.

Without access to stable housing and services, many people experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness (15-20 percent) become trapped in a homelessness-jail cycle – rotating in and out of jail, detoxification centers, and emergency health care. This cycle doesn’t help people access the assistance they need to find stability, and it comes at a major cost to taxpayers.

Two nonprofit affordable housing developers, Visionary Ventures, a Native American nonprofit, and Full Circle Communities, ventured jointly to develop the first affordable housing for the Native American community in Chicago’s history.

Discussion Questions

- The Housing First approach was a radical departure from the previous policy of “housing readiness” described as the staircase model (or housing as a reward based on changes in lifestyle, behaviors, etc.) from the 1980s and 1990s. How do you see the differences in these orientations for how best to solve being unhoused?
- The conclusion of Dan’s story highlights the Housing First model where providing housing and support up front, without first requiring treatment compliance and drug and alcohol abstinence, both saves the city money and has proven to be effective across multiple cities. This model also underpins Tracy Baim’s work in the tiny homes movement. After seeing Housing First in action, what questions do you have? Why do you think resistance to this model still remains? What recommendations can you think of to minimize these barriers?

City of Chicago

[The Systems Change Collaborative](#) identified 16 key recommendations to support health, equity, and well-being for people experiencing homelessness in Chicago. The Chicago Department of Public Health plans to work with partners to move these recommendations forward.

Care Integration

- Maintain, evaluate, and expand the shelter-based care model
- Refine and benchmark standards for shelter-based care and incorporate these into shelter/CoC standards
- Increase access and support for substance use disorder treatment, including medication assisted treatment (MAT), Narcan knowledge and training, overdose follow-up, and drop-in services

State and Federal Advocacy

- Advocate for additional flexibility for health care reimbursement mechanisms in Medicaid (i.e., loaded rates or per member per month [PMPM], not fee-for-service)
- Advocate for Medicaid funding for [tenancy supports](#)
- Increase medical respite beds

Homeless Service Systems

- Expand non-congregate shelter, stabilization housing, and low-barrier shelter programs
- Increase accessible emergency shelter options and improve processes to ensure individuals with disabilities are directed to an appropriate shelter
- Increase trauma training and support for shelter/housing continuum staff
- Expand case conferencing within the Continuum of Care to include Manage Care Organizations (MCO)/care coordinators and health care teams
- Increase the role people with lived experiences have in decision-making about homeless services, programs, and policies. (Roles could include serving as community RFP reviewers or as consultants when new programs or policies related to homelessness are being developed and city priorities are being shaped.)

Data Systems

- Establish a community information exchange (CIE) as a data bridge between health care and homeless service providers
- Design and implement a health/health care checklist in homeless management information systems (HMIS) for people leaving a shelter to enter permanent housing
- Create a new process to ensure people experiencing homelessness have disability status captured in HMIS by medical professionals

System Funding and Sustainability

- Streamline reporting requirements between funders, and support foundation partners to conduct advocacy and public funder education on behalf of funding sectors and align funders on best practices
- Increase pay equity among homeless service staff and support employment opportunities for people with lived experience in the sector

Community Resources

Firsthand: Homeless Community Partners

[All Chicago](#) prevents and ends homelessness through four approaches: emergency financial assistance, community partnerships, citywide database analysis on those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and providing trainings, tools, and information to community partners to help address homelessness more effectively.

allchicago.org

[The Chicago Public Library](#) offers 81 locations that provide library services, technology, and tools that Chicagoans need to reach their goals. Chicago Public Libraries are often used by those that are homeless as a place of refuge, getting out the cold or heat, and to use the library resources to look for housing and employment opportunities.

chipublib.org

[The Night Ministry](#) is a Chicago-based organization whose mission is to provide human connection, housing support, and health care to those who are unhoused or experiencing poverty. The Night Ministry works alongside individuals to advocate for their immediate physical, emotional, and social needs, while affirming our shared humanity.

thenightministry.org

Chicago and State of Illinois Resources

[The Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County](#) works toward preventing homelessness by providing interventions before households experience a housing crisis, building system capacity for and rapid exit to permanent housing options, expanding options for permanent housing, and building systems architecture to drive change.

suburbancook.org

[The Boulevard](#) provides high-quality, cost-effective medical respite care, holistic support, and housing services to help ill and injured homeless adults break the cycle of homelessness, restore their health, and rebuild their lives.

blvd.org

[Casa Central](#) is one of the largest Latino social service agencies in the Midwest. Through comprehensive, family-centered programming, thousands of individuals build hope for the future while equipping themselves to achieve a sustainable, higher quality of life.

casacentral.org

[The Center for Changing Lives](#) (CCL) responds to the needs of individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. CCL connects people to resources and opportunities to find solutions to individual, organizational, and community challenges.

cclconnect.org

[The Chicago American Indian Community Collaborative](#) is a network of 17 Native American organizations and programs that joined together in 2012 to collectively work on improving conditions for Native Americans in the Chicago area.

chicagoaicc.com

[The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless](#) (CCH) leads strategic campaigns, community outreach, and public policy initiatives that target the lack of affordable housing in metropolitan Chicago and across Illinois.

chicagohomeless.org

[City of Chicago: Homeless Services](#) manages numerous programs for residents of the city, including the rental assistance program (RAP), coordinated entry system, Emergency Homeless Assessment and Response Center (EHARC), outreach and prevention programs, homeless shelters, mobile response and referral network, point-in-time content work, and more.

chicago.gov/city/en/depts/fss/provdrs/emerg.html

[Connections for the Homeless](#) works towards preventing homelessness one person at a time, offering financial assistance for those facing eviction, providing emergency shelter and securing permanent housing options, and organizing advocacy efforts.

connect2home.org

[Covenant House](#) supports young people experiencing homelessness and survivors of human trafficking with a warm bed, food, health and wellness services, and a case manager. Other services include long-term support and education and employment assistance, as well as physical and mental health support.

covenanthouse.org

[Deborah's Place](#) opens doors of opportunity for women who are homeless in Chicago. Supportive housing and services offer women their key to healing, achieving their goals, and moving on from the experience of homelessness.

deborahsplace.org

[Ignite](#) utilizes a comprehensive model with supportive services and action plans to ensure vulnerable and homeless youth are on a path that includes personal and economic growth.

ignitepromise.org

[La Casa Norte](#) follows a Housing First model, offering housing resources and services to unaccompanied youth and families from Chicago's West and South sides who experience or are at risk of homelessness.

lacasanorte.org

[Matthew House Chicago](#), a nonprofit community-based organization, provides food, daytime shelter, permanent supportive housing, and supportive services to men, women, families, and children who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

mhchicago.org

[The Multi-Faith Veterans Initiative at DePaul University](#) works to develop leadership, build capacity, and create community circles within faith-based organizations to support veterans transitioning from military service.

resources.depaul.edu/steanscenter

[The Network – Advocating Against Domestic Violence](#) is a group of 40+ member organizations dedicated to improving the lives of those impacted by gender-based violence through education, public policy and advocacy, and connecting community members with direct service providers.

the-network.org

[North Side Housing and Supportive Services](#) works to end homelessness in the lives of individuals by providing housing and comprehensive supportive services, striving to eradicate the conditions that cause, contribute to, and exacerbate homelessness.

northsidehousing.org

[South Suburban PADS](#) works to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring. PADS provides emergency shelter, affordable homes, and supportive services that enable people to overcome homelessness and find pathways home.

sspads.org

[Thresholds](#) fights to transform the lives of people living with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, ultimately working to break cycles of poverty and unemployment. Thresholds fosters opportunities for housing, employment, and recovery.

thresholds.org

National Resources

[Continuum of Care \(CoC\) Homeless Assistance Programs](#) provide counts for sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons by household type and subpopulation, available at the national and state level and for each CoC.

hudexchange.info

[The National Coalition for the Homeless](#) addresses the underlying issues of racist housing policy, disinvestment in affordable housing, and other policies that have created sustained inequalities. The organization advises state and local governments and agencies on improving their programs and systems so they work better for people needing assistance.

nationalhomeless.org

[The National Health Care for the Homeless Council](#) has been working to improve homeless health care since 1986 through training and technical assistance, researching and sharing best practices, and advocating for real solutions to end homelessness.

nhhc.org

About The Filmmaker

Dan Protes is the executive producer of *Firsthand: Homeless*. He brings more than 25 years of experience as an executive producer, director, and writer, creating content for media outlets including WTTW, PBS *NewsHour*, *Nightline*, WPWR, and CSPAN. Dan's recent work includes the Emmy-winning weekly history series *Chicago Stories*, which he oversaw as executive producer through two seasons, and the national primetime series *10 that Changed America*, which was seen by millions of Americans through its three-season run on PBS. As the founding producer/director of *Firsthand*, he created the series in 2020 to spotlight Chicago's gun violence epidemic and has continued to oversee the project over four subsequent seasons as executive producer. In 2022, Dan founded Protes Communications, which produces original documentaries, in addition to a wide range of communications for corporate, nonprofit, and financial services clients.

About The Discussion Guide Writer

Since 2015, [Blueshift Education, Inc.](#) has developed impact educational resources – film-tailored curriculum, guides, advocacy toolkits, and interactive platforms. Their work equips documentary film teams, impact producers, public television, nonprofit organizations, and educational initiatives with the tools needed to deepen knowledge and empower action.

Fran Sterling, primary writer of the discussion guide for *Firsthand: Homeless*, is director of Blueshift and has more than 30 years of experience in education and social justice work. She and her team have more than 130 documentary impact projects under their belts. Fran holds an MA in Curriculum and Instruction, has completed her PhD coursework in Cultural Studies, was a former high school history teacher and worked for Facing History and Ourselves before co-founding Blueshift Education. Alongside Blueshift work, she currently is director of education for Life Stories, a division of the Kunhardt Film Foundation.

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