

Hiding in Plain Sight: Making the Invisible Visible

Submitted by Deb Convery – Communications Manager for AHC & I-RISE

On an unseasonably warm Fall Saturday in October, the Blessing Bags have just been completed by members of RCHP and are being loaded into the Global Grace Mobile Clinic, and Sarat Busari, Community Health Promoter, will drive the RV to a homeless encampment down in Monmouth County. The blessing bags, containing toiletries, snacks, items like warm Winter socks, and messages of love and support, will be distributed to some of the residents of the camp, many who are elderly.

Meanwhile, other members of the GG Health team, and guests like myself, ride down in a separate vehicle with Dr. Norma Bowe, Program Director of Global Grace Health. We're stuck in traffic on Route 18 South, so there's plenty of time to look at shopping malls, some of which are empty, casualties of the on-line shopping boom. "They're tearing down these empty malls and building cube apartments – that's what I call them – which will go for \$3,000 a month! ”.

The affordable housing crisis has affected most segments of the population, whether you're a buyer or a renter. Many of the people in the homeless encampment we'll be visiting today are elderly, receiving social security and pension checks, but sometimes that's just not enough these days to have even a modest roof over their heads. How did we get to this point? “I feel like this stems from a culture of toxic individualism”, Dr. Bowe says. Indeed, those malls that are being torn down now were what replaced the mom-and-pop shops on Main Street 40 years ago, where many people knew each other by name.

We arrive at the site of the encampment, parking in a supermarket parking lot, meeting up with Sarat and Andrea Mesa-Gutierrez, Community Health Promoter. We unload a few blessing bags and make our way into the woods, right next to the parking lot. Tents, some up on large wooden pallets, along with bicycles, shopping carts and other assorted items, are scattered throughout the wooded area. Dr. Bowe is looking for one person in particular, Tommy, who had to have his leg amputated when an infection got out of control and whose other leg was now also infected. “They put him in a hotel”, an



encampment resident said, which means that's for a limited time, and so that's an uncertain future for Tommy.

Dr. Bowe introduces me to Craig, who says he's been living in the encampment for five years. He says that at this point, "all that's standing between me and housing is a social security card" which he says was stolen. The challenge has been obtaining the documentation he needs to prove his identity. Once he gets his social security card, the township will provide him with housing, which can't come quick enough; the residents of the encampment have been told they need to be out by October 26.

Dr. Bowe is happy to meet up with Ramon and Isabelle. "I've been trying to get them to go to a Methadone clinic for months", she said on the car ride down. To her surprise and delight, they have started a Methadone program. "They look better than I've seen them in a long time" she says later. Ramon lived with his grandmother, but she died and once the house was sold, he had nowhere to go.



Dr. Bowe points to a brook with water that's not flowing. "This is their bathtub", she says, "this is where they wash up". Most residents of the encampment are out for the afternoon, so the mobile clinic will be rescheduled for another day. The remainder of the bags we've brought are distributed and we make our way out of the woods. As we reach the supermarket parking lot, I look back. If you were just an average person, doing your weekly shopping, you'd have no clue there were

tents just a few hundred yards away. "This is something you'd expect to see in a developing country, not the U.S.", Sarat says.

"Anyone want the last slice of pizza?", Dr. Bowe asks on the ride back. No takers. I ask Saeed - a Case Aid, originally from Iran, - if he was surprised to see the homeless encampments. "Yes. You see the movies from the U.S. and everything is beautiful". Dr. Bowe asks Bella, a high school student who's volunteering for the day, to roll down her window; she's spotted a homeless man carrying a sign. The car comes to a stop at a sidewalk curb by Boyd Park in New Brunswick on Route 18 and Bella hands the man the pizza box. He thanks us and the day comes to an end for Dr. Bowe and her team.

Dr. Bowe and her team visit homeless communities throughout much of the state of NJ - in wooded areas, under bridges and at train stations - on a regular basis. If you would like to accompany the team on a visit, please contact normabowe@gmail.com

If you'd like to help assemble Blessing Bags at RCHP and/or donate supplies, please contact Karen Uyar at karenuyar@yahoo.com

Names have been changed to protect privacy

UPDATE: As of mid-November, the encampment residents remain in their wooded residence. Tommy returned after his allowable 30-day hotel stay.



Dr. Bowe and her team make the rounds (see additional photo below)



The sign reads "Complete Renovation. All new everything - \$3,500/mo"