



THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

August 17, 2021

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Liz Clasen-Kelly, ED, Roof Above

By Jim Kelley

Cheryl Banks introduced our speaker, Liz Clasen-Kelly, the Executive Director of Roof Above.

Liz presided over a merger of the Urban Ministry Center with the Men's Shelter during the pandemic that posed an out-sized threat to our neighbors who lack housing and led to the spontaneous creation of a burgeoning tent city. Then she helped the county dismantle that temporary encampment that ringed her base of operations on the northern edge of center city. 200 homeless people were moved into motels.

Prior to being Executive Director of Roof Above, Liz was Executive Director of the Men's Shelter and prior to that she was the Assistant Director of Urban Ministry Center. Liz has been involved in working with the homeless since she was 19 years old and a college freshman at Davidson. She has a master's degree in public policy from Duke.

Still, she and her staff, aided by dedicated volunteers, continue to feed Charlotte's homeless people as well as seek and find housing for them. All the while, she continues to preach that providing housing for the less fortunate, regardless of their background or employment record, is the best prescription to prevent people from living on the street.

Liz mentioned a few stories of men that Roof Above has served. Some of the stories break your heart but she is also impressed by the capacity that men have for kindness and resilience and change. So, she is always hopeful. She is looking at systems and structures. As of June, 2021,

Mecklenburg County estimates that there are 3,137 homeless people in the county.

Liz estimates three facts about homelessness.

1. Homelessness is not inevitable. Some choices got us into homelessness in the 1970's and 1980's. First, there was deinstitutionalization that didn't fund alternatives. Second, there was a deep reduction, 70%, in the HUD budget. Third, there was a response to the substance use epidemic. Choices got us into homelessness and choices can get us out.
2. Prosperity and homelessness are linked. As communities prosper, housing costs rise and individuals can no longer afford housing. In 2010, 51% of the housing in Mecklenburg County was below \$800 a month. By 2018, only 25% of the housing in Mecklenburg County was below \$800 a month. The private housing market is the primary source of affordable housing.
3. The solution is housing. In the 1970's and 1980's the focus was on housing readiness so individuals had to "earn" housing. In the 1990's, the focus moved to housing first so housing was not a reward for clinical success but rather that successful outcomes were more likely when an individual already has housing. Then you provide support services to them once they have housing.

Liz mentioned that the Urban Ministry Center and the Men's Shelter merged for three reasons: (1) Have a greater impact; (2) Be more effective advocates in the public policy arena; (3) Increase the scale or grow services. Roof Above serves 1,200 people every day. During COVID, they have grown from 6 campuses to 12 campuses. They focus on three groups of people: (1) the unsheltered through street outreach and day services; (2) emergency shelter through 400 year-round beds, Room in the Inn during the winter months and (3) housing through transitional housing, short term supportive housing and permanent supportive housing.

As it relates to housing in item three above, Liz mentioned two purchases in November, 2020. First, they purchased 341 units of NOAH (naturally occurring affordable housing) where they charge 75 units \$200 a month and the rest of the units they charge \$750 or \$800 a month. They also purchased a hotel that they converted into permanent supportive housing at a cost of \$12 million. The converted hotel will support 88 people.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/588551665>

The presentation begins at 16:15 minutes.