

NO ROOM IN PARADISE

Addressing Honolulu's Homeless Crisis

DISCUSSION GUIDE





NO ROOM IN PARADISE

Paradise comes with a price tag: some of the most expensive housing in America and the nation's worst homeless crisis. Honolulu is at the forefront of cities trying to respond with "Housing First" policies, but as this film makes clear, until the community builds more affordable housing, closes the poverty gap and fixes holes in health and support services, the problem is destined to get worse.





Dennis Francis
Publisher
The Honolulu Star-Advertiser

“When your work helps push the Legislature to debate a \$2 billion dollar affordable housing bond in our little state, you’re talking about some powerful filmmaking.”



Michaela Rinkel, M.S.W., PH.D.
Assistant Professor
& Field Director
School of Social Work
Hawai'i Pacific University

“The best documentary on homelessness I have ever seen, both from an emotional and policy point of view. A truly useful teaching tool for graduate and undergraduate courses in Social Work. The film does an extraordinary job covering the complexity of the homeless crisis. It demonstrates how much money we waste just maintaining the status quo and how we could reap savings by investing in services and affordable housing. And it does this without ever losing sight of the basic humanity of the people living on the streets. This is a must-see for anyone studying Social Work, Public-Interest Law or Public Health policy.”



Senator Josh Green, M.D.
Chair
Senate Committee on Human
Services
State of Hawai'i

“This film has galvanized Hawai'i's legislature to act, and has encouraged diverse segments of our society to choose to work together to deal with the crisis. As Chair of the Human Services Committee in the Hawaii State Senate, I have invited Anthony Aalto, the director of No Room In Paradise, to join our task force on homelessness – his voice must be part of the discussion. I would encourage anyone who is engaged on this issue in the country to watch Mr. Aalto's poignant film.”



Rick Blangiardi
General Manager
Hawaii News Now

“No Room In Paradise' is the most consequential local documentary of a threatening social issue that has ever been broadcast in Hawaii. The 90 minute video is widely acknowledged for helping galvanize our political leaders into unprecedented action to reduce homelessness in Hawaii – including an on-going effort in the Legislature to borrow \$2 billion to help finance the construction of 22,000 desperately needed affordable rental apartments and an additional bill which will classify chronic homelessness as a health condition in order to access much needed Medicaid funds.”



Patricia L. Ah Sam Ed.D.
Professor of Nursing
Department of Nursing
Hawai'i Pacific University

“They say a picture is worth a thousand words. “No Room in Paradise” has become an invaluable tool for us to let our students see the many different facets of homelessness in a very candid and concise way. We use it to begin a dialog with our new students across the helping professions (nursing, social work and public health) in our college about the problems faced and how inter-professionally we all work to resolve the issues. I also use it with my health policy students as a way to discuss how policy can help and can hinder solutions. We talk about how change is necessary as old ways haven't remedied the problem.”



Bill Hummel
Program Director
Lighthouse Homeless Shelter
Waipahu, Hawai'i

“No Room In Paradise does a superb job showing just how complex homelessness is. It illustrates the vast resources that are wasted triaging the symptoms rather than curing the causes of this painful social disease and it shows that if we built the desperately needed housing and provided the chronically homeless with social and health care services, the community at large would ultimately save hundreds of millions of dollars. But the film also captures the drama of the people whose lives it chronicles and I found myself rooting for them to succeed. Anyone who intends to work in this field should watch this film.”

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Case management

In the film, Connie Mitchell, the Executive Director of the Institute for Human Services –which is the largest non-governmental homeless agency in the state- says “Our system needs about 45 case managers that are dedicated solely to chronically homeless people in order for our Housing First programs to really work. 45 case managers would cost maybe about 3 million dollars, but I tell you they will save many more million dollars.” The recommended caseload for a case manager is 10 clients. In Hawaii case managers handle as many as 30 clients. Discuss the implications of this situation.

Child Welfare Services

Nancy and Stefanie –the two central protagonists in the film- both have their children removed from them. Despite their homelessness and their addiction issues, they both appear to be devoted mothers. The decision to remove children from their parents is extremely difficult with potentially negative consequences for both mothers and children. Discuss some of the issues involved.

Domestic violence

Nancy and Stefanie –the two central protagonists in the film- are both victims of domestic violence. After fleeing abuse they end up living on the street with their children. As the film demonstrates, the effects of domestic violence –such as isolation and poverty- often linger long after women escape their abusers and those conditions can complicate efforts to get them permanently housed. Discuss.

Drug Rehab

In the film Alan Johnson, the CEO of Hina Mauka, the largest drug-rehab facility in the state says, “The huge number we’re turning away, are people come to us and say, “Please help me.” and we say, “You’re not sick enough because the system says you need to be sick enough, and because you don’t meet medical necessity and we turn you away.” And they go, “Where do we go?” and we say, “You don’t go anywhere. there’s nowhere for you to go.” It’s as if we’re saying to them, “Go out, get sicker, and then come back and we’ll help you. But don’t be too sick, because if you’re too sick we can’t help you, either.”” Explain what you think he means by this and what remedies ought to be considered to the problems he describes.

Ex-convicts

In the film we see how Sam Ingall leaves prison, after spending more than 15 years of his life locked-up, determined to start working and never again be incarcerated. But he has no ID, no money, no job and only the address of an emergency homeless shelter as a place to sleep. Within 5 days he is in the ER suffering from a bout of drug-induced psychosis and shortly thereafter he is arrested for drug possession. What could be done to prevent ex-cons from immediately becoming homeless and to give them a fresh start in life?

Fear of shelters

Nancy and Stefanie –the two central protagonists in the film- are offered beds in an emergency shelter. They complete the registration process, but ultimately refuse to stay. Their excuse is: too many rules triggering memories of when their lives were controlled by abusive husbands. Shelter rules typically include bans on pets, prohibitions on use of alcohol and drugs, and strict hours of admittance. Other problems that may discourage chronically homeless people from using shelters include assaults and thefts, bed bugs, fear of contracting illness and abusive or disrespectful staff. What role should shelters be expected to play in coping with the homeless crisis? How should shelters be improved without disincentivizing clients from continuing the process of finding permanent housing?

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Housing affordability

In the film, Laura Manzano, a homeless case manager, is shown making dozens of calls trying to find an apartment for a Housing First client with a \$2430 per month subsidy. Looking at rental listings Laura comments on her efforts, “They don’t do rent subsidies it goes against their company policy.... It already says no Section 8 right there. ... No Housing Assistance, see it? It’s right there, see that?” The film repeatedly returns to the issue of housing affordability. One of the problems with finding adequate affordable housing that is illustrated in the film is the reluctance of many landlords to accept Section 8 or Housing First type subsidies. What strategies can be employed to help overcome this reluctance?

Housing First

Nancy and Stefanie –the two central protagonists in the film- are eventually housed under the city’s Housing First program. Housing First is the preferred program of the federal department of Housing & Urban Development. The rationale behind Housing First is to house chronically homeless people as fast as possible and then deal with the issues (addiction/mental illness/PTSD etc) that caused them to be homeless in the first place. The concept has some potential flaws, as seen in the film: a chronic shortage of affordable housing and a shortage of social workers and social services such as drug rehab and mental health programs. What should be done to address these issues?

Housing shortage

The film illustrates the problem of the shortage of affordable housing. A real estate developer in the film argues for public-private partnerships. Another method of generating affordable housing has been to build public housing –owned and managed by government. Discuss the pros and cons of these two approaches and any other method that might lead to an expansion of the inventory of affordable housing.

Medical Care and the Chronically Homeless

In the film we see how Gary Yahiku –a one-legged, methamphetamine-addicted homeless man suffering from dementia and diabetes- is costing the health system as much as \$500,000 a year, much of it spent on medically unnecessary visits to the ER. One approach currently being debated by the Hawaii state Legislature is to change the rules to allow homelessness to be diagnosed as a health condition, thereby allowing Medicaid funds to be used for housing. Discuss the merits of this approach and other ways in which the costs to the health care system incurred by the homeless might be reduced.

Mental Illness

As the film makes clear, a significant proportion of the chronically homeless suffer from severe mental illness. There aren’t enough services for them. But even if there were, outreach workers who know who they are and engage them daily, find it difficult to persuade them to enter shelters or take medication. It is legally extremely difficult to force people to take medication or to hospitalize them. A nurse in the film suggests that “The pendulum that swung from the mentally ill having no rights to the mentally ill having so many rights that they can’t get the care that they need has got to somehow come back to some sort of middle ground where they can get the care that they need, even though they may not be of sound enough judgment.” Discuss.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Micronesians

The film looks at the particular situation of Micronesian migrants – who are legally allowed to move to the USA under the terms of the Compact of Free Association, but whose circumstances in many ways parallel those of undocumented immigrants from Latin America. Many of these migrants move to Hawaii because they have no access to decent health care and education in Micronesia. They have few job skills and often speak little English so they end up in minimum wage jobs that don't pay enough to cover the rent. What are some of the approaches that might be considered to help this segment of the homeless population?

Resistance to Outreach

The homeless veteran in the film, Kawika Castro, resists the approaches of outreach workers for months before finally succumbing and agreeing to be helped. What are some of the reasons that lead the homeless to resist outreach efforts and what can be done to overcome this issue?

Seniors

In the film Barbara Kim Stanton, the Executive Director of AARP Hawaii says, “We are woefully unprepared for an aging society. The average working class family has about \$3,000 in retirement assets. Long term care in a private institution costs about \$135,000 a year, and you normally need on average, three years.” What should be done to prepare for our aging society? What must we do to avoid seeing many more seniors become homeless in coming years?

Sense of community

Nancy and Stefanie –the two central protagonists in the film- discuss the fact that living in the homeless encampment provides a sense of community they have never before experienced. After being housed, Nancy explains how lonely she feels, which may explain her continued use of methamphetamines. What strategies could be employed to help homeless people deal with the need for emotional support?

Sit/lie laws and sweeps

The film starts with a “sweep” in which a homeless encampment is cleared away by sanitation crews backed by police. The film also shows an interview with the Mayor of Honolulu in which he defends ordinances that prohibit sitting or lying on the sidewalk as “compassionate disruption.” Some organizations claim sweeps are cruel and sit/lie laws criminalize homelessness. But Connie Mitchell, the Executive Director of the Institute for Human Services –which is the largest non-governmental homeless agency in the state- says that the sweeps are often needed to encourage the chronically homeless to accept outreach services and start the process of getting housed. Which side is right?

Teens

In the film Raven Fernandez-Castro describes the experience of being kicked out of his home and becoming homeless at the age of 11. What are the typical reasons for teens to become homeless? What are the issues that are specific to homeless teens and what can be done to target specific solutions at this group?

Tent cities

The film takes a look at a tent city of some 250 people that has been in existence for 13 years and even has elected its own “mayor” and “deputy mayor.” The encampment is tolerated by the authorities and is self-policing and provides a much-needed safe space for its residents. However tent cities are generally frowned upon by experts and by the federal department of Housing & Urban Development. The preferred solution to deal with people in tent cities is to move them into housing under a Housing First program as fast as possible. However what happens when there isn't enough readily available housing - as in Hawaii? Is a self-regulating tent city preferable to sleeping on the sidewalk? Do tent cities have a place in the spectrum of responses to homelessness?