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'Winning really matters.' Discussing homelessness with Liz Hersh, Office of Supportive Housing

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- By [Jared Brey](#)
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- [1401 JFK Boulevard, Philadelphia, Pa.](#)



- Liz Hersh | Emma Lee / WHYY

Early in January, Mayor Jim Kenney [announced](#) that Liz Hersh would become director of the Office of Supportive Housing, which coordinates the City's efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness. Prior to taking on the new gig, Hersh spent more than a decade as director of the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, which was instrumental in [securing new funding](#) for the state housing trust fund with income from the realty transfer tax.

Last Thursday, the Office of Supportive Housing announced that it had received \$28 million in grants to support its work. PlanPhilly sat down with Hersh on Friday. She wore earrings with little houses on them.

The following Q&A has been edited. If you prefer, read the full transcript [here](#).

So can you tell me what your priority is for the new job? What are some of the first either policy or funding opportunities you're going to explore? I saw you got [a bunch of grants](#) yesterday ...

Yeah, those were renewals. That doesn't expand the supply of units. We're very thankful that we were competitive to get the units renewed, otherwise people would be displaced and we'd have shrinking supply, which is not the direction we want to go.

I think that the first thing that we want to do is take on street homelessness. There's kind of a convergence of a couple of different forces. One is that HUD is requiring that we end chronic homelessness in the next couple of years. Just like we got to [functional zero with veterans' homelessness](#), that's the next priority. We're really mandated, from a regulatory perspective, to address chronic homelessness.

And there's a lot of good reasons for doing that. People experiencing chronic homelessness absorb most of the resources for the system. They have the greatest physical, emotional and behavioral health needs as well as housing needs. So if you can reduce the number of chronic homeless people, you can free up resources to provide services for other people. Plus, it's just a horrible thing, right?

So that's one reason. But then we have this emergent problem which you've probably noticed, which is all the young people on the streets. Some of it is the opiate epidemic, some of it is kids aging out of foster care and the need for some kind of safety net or transitional plan, some of it is LGBTQ kids who are leaving home because when they come out, they are displaced. And I think clearly the life on the streets issue is kind of the tip of the iceberg.

So I think that's where we're going to start this spring. We're hoping to be able to do a bootcamp model—I don't know why it's called a boot camp, I'll tell you when I figure it out. But basically the idea is—and this is what was done with the veterans' homelessness—the idea is that city government can't solve these problems alone. Obviously these are big problems: loss of the industrial base, population, race, global economic forces. So we really have to have a collective impact. So the idea of the bootcamp model is you get all of the self-identified stakeholders together. You can bring in the business community, the civic associations, anybody who has a stake in this, and you come up with a 100-day plan for what you want to do. So we're going to do that sometime this spring. Part of that grant we got yesterday, this week, from HUD includes some planning funding to do that.

...

I think we have to be comprehensive about how we're looking at this. Clearly, when we look at little kids being in the shelter and families, it's a horrible thing, right? Little kids who are in shelters or who experience homelessness in the first few years of their lives have much worse lifetime prospects. They have poorer health, poorer earning potential, more mental health problems, more likely to attempt or commit suicide. There's all kinds of terrible things that happen to children when they experience homelessness in their early years. So clearly we have to be paying attention to that as well.

...

I was just talking to former mayor Wilson Goode last week and he was talking about the first time he saw homeless people in Philadelphia, in, I think it was 1980. In LOVE Park. And he was like, "Oh my god." They were sleeping there. And that had never happened before.

You're too young to remember this, but when I was growing up in Philadelphia in the '60s, we didn't have homelessness. Like, it's hard to believe, right? Even though Philly was in really bad shape, we didn't have homelessness. And once the safety net unraveled, then we started to have homelessness. So a lot of our homeless systems really date back a long time, and so we have to look at, are we using a 1980 model in a 2016 world? And could we be doing something different? Are people going to shelter who could maybe stay in their own home? Or could we use a rapid-rehab housing model, or a shorter-term intervention so we don't displace them? Can we move upstream?

...

That's really why took this job, was to allow us to dig into those questions. And honestly I'm not sure what the answers are, but I think we have to be honest and say we need to understand better what's working, that we need to replicate and expand, and what can we do that would create a more humane system where episodes of homelessness are rare, brief, and non-recurring. That's really how we want to move forward.

So I was actually going to ask you about that, because I've noticed that you don't talk about ending homelessness. You haven't talked about it in those terms.

I would love to. I would love to.

You talk about it with this phrase "rare, brief, and non-recurring." So I'm wondering why that language as opposed to the sort of triumphant ...

Personally, I would love to end homelessness. I just think that it's really, really hard. Because we are dealing in an environment with really national and multinational forces, I'm not really sure ...

The reason we were able to end veteran homelessness in many cities—and we'll see if we can sustain it. It's one thing to have a period at the end of a sentence and it's another thing to close the book—is because Congress put serious money on the table ... So when we did street outreach and worked with the VA on identifying veterans who are homeless who need a place to live, there was some place for them to go. That does not exist for children, families, or chronically homeless people.

And Philadelphia simply doesn't have the tax base. With 25 percent of our people living below the poverty line, we could tax everybody—you and I could be paying all of our income to taxes, and it still wouldn't be enough money. We have to have a broader base. We still don't have a budget from last year in Harrisburg, and in Congress, the House just rejected the latest budget agreement.

There's so many forces that we have no control over, so I think we have to look at what we do have control over while we continue to advocate. And I spent the last 20 some years of my life being an advocate for more resources, and we've been successful. We have a national housing trust fund and a state housing trust fund and a city housing trust fund. We're doing all of the things, but those are bigger advocacy issues to get more resources into homelessness.

To me, a more productive thing for me to be doing in this position is to look at how are we spending the resources that we have? The human capital that we have. The financial capital that we have.

And do you think that comes out of your background in activism, that you want to find measurable goals that you can achieve?

I think that winning really matters. I really do. And I would consider myself more of an advocate than an activist, because I try to work within the system, and I try to work with everybody. I'm really not adversarial or oppositional. I think that that's really valuable for people to do that, it's just not me.

My vision is to build. To build support, build momentum, build engagement, build partners, and to get everybody rowing in the same direction. The business community, the civic organizations, the nonprofit providers, the faith groups, the people on the street themselves, our organizations. I think the only way that you can do that is by having success, because people have to feel like it's worthwhile. I think that we have to break down these big problems into bite-size pieces, where people can go, "OK, I can do that."

... And, look, everybody lives in the city. Everybody knows these are deep, complicated problems. Nobody wants to treat homeless people like a litter problem, but what can we do?

OK, well, one thing we can do is we can say, "Don't give panhandlers money." If you see someone who's homeless and you're really worried about their health and well-being, [call outreach](#). If you see somebody who's actively hallucinating or delusional, just give me a phone number to call so I can be a human being. If somebody's asking me for money, buy them a meal. It's OK. You can have a human reaction. And then at least you don't feel so angry and alienated from the solution, like you can do something.

I don't feel like I've compromised my ideals—although my 21-year-old daughter might see it differently. That's the beauty of having young people out there fighting, which is great, and I'm so glad they're all out there. My thing is, how do we get as many people involved in trying to come up with some real solutions that really make a difference in a win-win way, in a compassionate and positive and solutions-based way.

Why is it problematic to give panhandlers money?

Well, on the streets right now there's a lot of different people, right? But let's just say for the sake of discussion, three categories. People who are homeless, who tend to be passive. They're victims, by and large, themselves. You have people who have serious behavioral health problems who either need or can't get treatment, maybe they need it and can get it, but whatever, they're not ready. And then you have people who are panhandling because they're making a living at it.

Panhandling is generally not a homelessness problem. It's an economic opportunity, and so if somebody gives you money, you're going to come back to that spot every day and try to get more money. Right? So I think, ideally we want more economic opportunity and more jobs and all of that so people have options. But at least on the supply side, not giving people money, at least you reduce the attractiveness of panhandling.

It's not illegal. It's really considered to be a free-speech area as long as you're not aggressive or harming somebody or blocking an entrance or exit. So we'd really like to discourage panhandling and encourage people who see someone who's really in distress or who's homeless or suffering, and you're concerned, that you treat them in a humane way, and if you want to, call outreach and get somebody who has more experience.

And outreach is amazing. It takes time. It's a slow process. But it works. Over time, people go in if we have places for them to go.

So what do you think are the main housing problems in Philadelphia, and I wonder how you think they differ from housing problems statewide that you've been dealing with.

Housing problems statewide are very similar to housing problems in Philadelphia, it's just that everything is more and bigger in Philly than everywhere else. ... Our biggest problem is our housing stock is old. It's really old. A lot of it is in really bad shape, and it's very expensive to fix up.

So what that means is, for renters who are in the unsubsidized market, they're probably living in conditions that are not ideal. And actually, I'm very sympathetic to the private rental owners, by and large. ... A lot of them, if you're providing rental housing in a lot of neighborhoods in Philly, you can't generate enough rent to make major capital investments. If you need to do a heater, boiler, roof, windows, major infrastructure, your rent stream is not going to give you that money, by and large. They're really under tremendous constraints. ...

So I think housing quality is a big issue. We don't have a rental repair program. We have owner repair programs that are oversubscribed, but we really don't have any help for the mom-and-pop landlord who wants to rent at an affordable rate to someone, to be able to make those major capital improvements.

And then, it's like any other real estate commodity: location and price problems. The places that are near transportation and jobs and the good schools and have low crime are higher prices. So people living on 10 bucks an hour or 12 bucks an hour, minimum wage, without some kind of subsidy they really can't afford to live in those places, so people end up being pushed away from the opportunities for better schools and jobs and all that. That's why I think community development and housing development and economic development, all those things are needed so that there's more opportunity for people regardless of where they live.

I think the mayor has really tried to adjust this with his five policy pillars [education, economic opportunity, public safety, effective government service and a diverse workforce]. And I've heard him say, and I really agree, that your zip code at birth shouldn't be your destiny. So I think the housing piece is just a part of that puzzle.

...

Here's the thing. Homelessness is a very expensive problem. Shelter is \$35 a day per person. A rent subsidy is about \$12,500 a year. You look at an ER, you look at cops, prisons, psych hospitals, even drug treatment, it's all much more expensive than having people stably housed. So if we're looking at finite resources, which we are, and scarce resources from public coffers, we have to figure out ways to turn the whole thing upside down, or right-side up, and stabilize housing for more people so that they don't become homeless. We're just paying and paying and paying.

About the author

Jared Brey, Reporter