

## **Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 2 Becky Denison (Date)**

### **Title: Root Causes of Homelessness with Becky Dennison**

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#### **SPEAKERS**

Host: Ashanti Blaze-Hopkins

Guest: Becky Denison, Executive Director of Venice Community Housing

**Ashanti:** Welcome to Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services, the podcast that takes a closer look at one of our community's most urgent challenges. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaze Hopkins, Interim Associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Each episode will engage with experts, policymakers, and educators to uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change. Joining us on the podcast today is someone who has spent more than 20 years in the homeless services sector. She has served as both an instructor and guest lecturer covering such topics as housing policy, criminalization of poverty, and equitable development at numerous colleges and universities. She has a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and a master's in public policy from the University of Minnesota and has since then worked in leadership for a number of homeless services and advocacy organizations. Currently she is the executive director of Venice Community Housing, a non-profit that works to invest in permanently affordable housing and advancing health and housing-based solutions for unhoused people with a focus on equity and inclusion. Becky Dennison, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

**Becky:** Thanks for having me.

**Ashanti:** So our first question for every one of our Doing What Works podcast guests is always the same. What was your first job ever, and how does what you learned in that position inform doing what works for you in your current role?

**Becky:** So my first job ever was working for Park and Rec, and I was a lifeguard and a little kid's gymnastics teacher. So in thinking about that, I also did gymnastics for a long time, so I was thinking about like, you know, flexibility and strength and asking for a spot in some help when

you need it, that bodies are very resilient, both those of us in the work, and thankfully there's a lot of resilience for folks experiencing homelessness, to get through those really, really tough times, so and, you know, probably a little bit about patience and teamwork and things like that. So yeah.

**Ashanti:** Yeah, especially working with those little girls who just love to, you know, squirreled. We're looking over here now.

**Becky:** I definitely like to do other things besides gymnastics, way more than gymnastics.

**Ashanti:** So shifting a bit, as someone who has been working in homeless services for more than two decades, what is your perspective on the root causes of homelessness, especially here in LA County?

**Becky:** Yeah, so I mean, I think fundamentally the root cause of homelessness is just housing unaffordability, and, you know, what drives that here in Los Angeles is a number of things, income inequality, the ability for folks at the highest incomes to be buying up multiple homes, multiple spaces, the fact that, you know, we have a pretty unregulated housing market, right? So we don't have true rent control. We don't have ways of, you know, sort of avoiding that price gouging. We don't have very good zoning, right? We're a single-family home sprawled city in which we can't get enough housing into the market, and then we don't subsidize nearly enough housing, right? So when the federal government really started to dismantle the public housing program, and we've never gone back to that system at all in terms of real investment in affordable housing, you know, we just, that's how we've seen homelessness grow over the last 40 years. Obviously, you know, institutional racism, the criminal justice system, the targeting of certain folks, and then the way that people legally discriminate and illegally discriminate in the housing market drives some of that. And then, you know, I think what is sometimes seen as root causes, I think, are more contributing causes like mental health and the, you know, inability for folks to get real mental health care, substance use, lack of harm reduction approaches there and lack of substance use treatment. But studies usually show that those are not root causes, but really are contributing causes, and I would say contributing factors, and that make it harder sometimes for folks to get out of being unhoused.

**Ashanti:** Do you see addressing homelessness as a social and racial justice issue? And if so, what are some effective approaches to consider moving towards sustainable and positively impactful in outcomes?

**Becky:** I do see it as a social and racial justice issue, racial justice in some of the ways that I just described, but also social justice perspective, just from a place of equity and what equitable communities look like, and that this is not a charity issue, this is a fundamental structural problem in our overall society, and then particularly here in Los Angeles. And so, you know, that's why I spent a lot of time in community organizing and really developing leadership amongst directly impacted people and sort of whose voices are at the table, who's made these decisions on behalf of other folks for so long at the, you know, the detriment of people

experiencing homelessness. And then also, you know, that's why fundamentally I think the solution to this problem is federal investment again, but a government investment in a real public or social housing could be either one or both program at scale that really does a full on market correction, right? We sort of work around the edges and BCH does it too, right? We build housing in the current systems because we're not going to do nothing. But until we really change the intervention in the housing market, you know, we're not going to fundamentally solve this problem.

**Ashanti:** Let's talk about your nonprofit, Venice Community Housing. I understand that the work that your nonprofit does is very much rooted in equity and inclusion, which you kind of mentioned being part of the contributing factors of homelessness. What is different about how Venice Community Housing is addressing the issue of homelessness and outreach to the on-house population?

**Becky:** I think we're trying to do a few things that are different, although we certainly have partner organizations doing similar work. One of the pieces we've added recently is a community-led design model, which is about sort of how decisions get made about the buildings that we're building. And usually community engagement and certainly public decision-making is really driven by wealthy white homeowners that have time to come to meetings and or already have some political power and access. And so we're trying to really shift that model and make sure that folks of color, low income people are the drivers of our community engagement and are making decisions about what's happening in their neighborhood and what's happening in this building. And we've added staff and kind of a department to really focus on that and change the way that we were making decisions as well. We're building housing across the kind of the west side of Los Angeles. So that does include higher income and lower income neighborhoods, but we do remain really focused on our home neighborhood of Venice and other surrounding areas of the west side that have been heavily gentrified since we started used to be really mixed income and diverse neighborhoods and are now no longer. So we're really fighting to restore access to those neighborhoods, and make sure that housing segregation in the city is addressed through affordable housing in all neighborhoods. So that's a piece of our work as well. And then internally, we're really focused on pay equity and representation and sort of who's making decisions on our board of directors. So I'm not sure that all of that is different or unique, but I think in combination, our focus has been somewhat unique across the board on equity and inclusion.

**Ashanti:** I'm sure many of our listeners may not realize that homeless services work can be very stressful. It can take a toll on those who have dedicated their lives to helping those who find themselves without daily resources and the support that they need. What is your particular why? What keeps you showing up to do this work each day? And was there a defining moment where you just knew this is what you were supposed to be doing?

**Becky:** I don't have that one defining moment. I feel like many of my colleagues do. I feel like mine was like a series of events in which I had done some service learning work in college in the Skid Row community. And I felt really drawn to the residents there in a lot of different ways

in terms of like my family experience and just the issues with low income folks and addiction and mental health. But I come from Minneapolis, which was a much smaller city, a mostly white city. And so starting to look at sort of how institutional racism, and misogyny and a lot of things that sort of were culminating in the Skid Row community. And I just felt like a former colleague of mine used to say, so once you know a problem exists, you're obligated to be contributing to it. And it was like that piece of the social justice side, but really the people themselves and the way that they were, again, sort of resiliency and care for their community and care for each other. I just felt really drawn into trying to contribute to that in some way. And it has been my why throughout, which is like, it's amazing, number one, when folks get housed, right? So from a BCH perspective, right? It's like, transformational in terms of health and future and what have you. But folks who've been unhoused for a long time are also incredibly inspiring. And I feel, yeah, I feel both obligated, but also really inspired. I haven't really had that sense of burnout. But I don't want to take away from the fact that the day to day work is really hard and particularly sort of on those front lines, right? Case managers, outreach workers, property managers. And I started this work as a case manager. So, I understand like the secondary trauma and the real frustration of like trying to house folks in a system that is not set up to house folks. So you're sort of always in the process of like saying, no, or just wait, or what have you in a way that's not good for people who are doing the work and not good for people who are trying to get housing and services. And so, you know, we do a lot of work at BCH that we're continuing to try to expand in terms of wellness and support and, you know, trying to increase pay, trying to increase benefits to really keep folks in the work. It's so important, but also understanding that it is, it takes a toll on people over time.

**Ashanti:** As someone who has worked both as a case worker and now as a leader in this space, what would make doing this homeless services work easier for leaders like you, but also for the boots on the ground, the workers who are in the field on a daily basis?

**Becky:** So the folks doing the work on the ground, I mean, I think it really is about a combination of wellness and supports and like really creating sustainable workplaces and increasing pay. That's not one or the other. They both sort of have to happen together. And as well as I think the, you know, community building, you know, sort of peer relationships, ways that, I mean, that's something that has sustained me a lot is sort of my original cohort that I met doing the work in Skid Row and sort of having those folks you can go to all the time or even just kind of unwind with. So kind of community building, cohort building, and making sure that people have time to really rest and recover. You know, there are folks at the executive director level, I don't think we need to make our lives easier even though the work is hard, but what would make the work easier is like, not having such a complicated and really broken system of building affordable housing, right? And really getting back to the basics of, you know, citing, funding, building, and not taking six and seven years to, you know, create just a small handful of units, but really like policies and financial resources that could get us to scale.

**Ashanti:** In talking about kind of that support, you know, especially with the frontline workers, it kind of makes me shift to this part of the conversation where Santa Monica College is launching a homeless services certificate program this fall, 2024. And the goal is really to duplicate that

curriculum so it may be offered at other community colleges across LA County. How important do you think it is to have programs like this for those who want to go into the homeless services sector, especially for those boots on the ground?

**Becky:** Well, it's really important, probably for many reasons. The number one reason I would say right now is there is a real shortage of people wanting to do this work. There's vacancies across the system on the case manager level, and we see a lot of turnover collectively, right? And I was just at a tenant meeting the other day in terms of like how that impacts people having to sort of retell their story over and over again and rebuild that relationship. So I think just in terms of it, you know, I'm not sure that it even been a long time since I went to college, but it certainly wasn't like something that came to me when I was in college, like, oh, I could do this, right? So getting it out much more broadly, seeing it as like a real career path and then, you know, thinking about how to really prepare people both on a skills level and a coping mechanism level and all those kinds of things. And I do think that programs like that also, like, you know, give people a sense of, oh, I could do this long term and keep people in the work longer. So I didn't actually know about the program until you and I connected, so I'm really excited about it, and I would love to hear more. And I'd love to, I think there's many of us in the field who would love to help and contribute too. It's so important to me to have people who are committing to this work long term. And it's really important for folks experiencing homelessness to have people who are ready and committed and skilled. It doesn't mean, you know, people can't build skills over time. They certainly can. But just like having a little base to be working from is amazing.

**Ashanti:** And being purposeful and intentional in upskilling in the workforce that's needed, right?

**Becky:** Exactly, exactly.

**Ashanti:** In your estimation, what do you think we're doing well here in Los Angeles County when it comes to addressing the homelessness issue? And what more do you think needs to be done that just isn't on anyone's radar right now?

**Becky:** It's really hard to say what we're doing well when we continue to see tens of thousands of folks living on our streets and sidewalks. I think there are a couple of things that are real best practices that we just haven't done at scale. A permanent supportive housing has to be one of that, right? Even though it's a little self-serving for Venice Community Housing to say that. But it just is true. It's the only for, especially for folks with disabilities or people who've been unhoused for a very long time. It is the, you know, sort of proven and cost-effective way of ending homelessness. And we pioneered that here in Los Angeles, you know, way back when, and just have never really brought that to scale. But it is like so important. I think our street medicine programs are really, really cutting edge and amazing. On the west side here, we have Venice Family Clinic, but there's a lot of folks doing it across the city, just bringing health resources directly to where folks are. There's very little we can do in terms of shelter and housing on an immediate basis, but we can do those health interventions on an immediate basis. And I would

put in there too, like harm reduction programs. We have like some really cutting edge organizations doing harm reduction overdose prevention here in LA. Again, just getting to scale. But the reason the street programs are so important is because we know we don't have enough housing. So we have to be thinking about how to creatively intervene with folks' health and mental health while they're living on our streets. So yeah, I think we're doing those things really well, not yet at scale.

**Ashanti:** I know that you touched on the housing affordability issue. You touched on the systemic racism that's also at the root at homelessness. If you had a magic wand and you could solve the issue of homelessness, what would you do if there were no barriers? Talk to me about what your dream state would look like.

**Becky:** My dream state would be that we would have like a social or public and or public housing program that was at scale, that we would just grab up public land, underutilized land, increase density in Los Angeles and just build what we need, and then operate it from what we learned in the past, right? So the original public housing program was steeped in disinvestment, racism and environmental justice issues, right, where people were living. So like, you know, creating like healthy, safe, accessible housing across the board that's like tenant driven and tenant led, and really is, you know, getting at the issues of housing segregation, access for everybody, reducing barriers and then like that community building once folks get there is really, I think, where collectively many of us in Los Angeles are trying to get to.

**Ashanti:** Do you think that we're going to be able to get there? And what needs to happen for that dream state to exist?

**Becky:** I mean, I kind of have to feel like we're going to get there, right? Otherwise, why do the work? Will we get there in my work life? I'm not sure. But I think we get we definitely can get there. We definitely can. But it would for sure take an incredible amount of investment at all levels of government, as well as some redirection of investment where we know, right? Like, so, you know, going from criminalization models to care first models and redirecting things out of our most expensive systems, militarization, criminal justice, etc. So, but yeah, we can get there.

**Ashanti:** So work is definitely being done, still have a long way to go.

**Becky:** Yeah

**Ashanti:** But I guess hope has to be at the center, right, of what everyone's working towards.

**Becky:** Yeah, right. It's like, you know, if we don't think we can get there, why do the work? And it's going to take a long time. So I think that's one thing is, you know, even if we had that dream state, it would take many, many years to move folks off of our streets and sidewalks. So the other thing too is like, we have to have a sense of urgency and patience at the same time. And for folks in Los Angeles, I know they're always, you know, we are working with urgency. We are organizing with urgency. And we also need folks to to have some patience and care about our

neighbors that are living on our streets and sidewalks and not demand that they be removed from site and those kinds of things because we really need that balance between urgency and patience and care for where we are right now.

**Ashanti:** Becky Dennison, thank you so much for sharing your insights and expertise with us. And thank you for joining us on doing what works, innovations and homeless services. We hope today's conversation has shed light on the complexities of homelessness and inspired ideas for change. If you found value in this episode, please subscribe, share and leave us a review together. We can continue the dialogue and support the efforts to create lasting solutions. Stay tuned for more insights from the experts leading the way, until next time.