

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 3 Dr. Nancy Greenstein (Date)

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Ashanti: Welcome to Doing What Works: Innovations, and 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 is nationally recognized for ideating and executing programs and strategies that focus on bringing diverse voices to the table in order to find solutions to some of LA County's most pressing issues. She is an educator, community organizer, and advocate for marginalized communities who has worked for numerous nonprofits and local government agencies. Our guest has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Boston University, a master's of social work with an emphasis in community organizing from UCLA, and a doctorate in education also from UCLA. Currently, she serves on the board of trustees of Santa Monica College, a position she has held for more than 20 years now, and in that role she has been a champion for career education programs, transfer, and lifelong learning models. Dr. Nancy Greenstein, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Nancy: Happy to be here.

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 roles?

Nancy: Well, my first real job was after I got my bachelor's degree, and it was teaching. And I worked in a two-room school at the end of a dirt road in Bacavido, New Mexico. It's part of the Navajo Nation, and I had grades two through four. And I lived behind the school, as did the

principal, the other teacher, the aide, the cook, the bus driver. And on the weekends, the families came to our school to use showers and resources. Also where we lived, the water was not potable. So we had to go to, it's about 10 miles, actually across the state line, to fill up jugs with water. So I became just so appreciative of all that I had growing up, and very, very cognizant of the differences. And so the position was life-changing. I was treated like family by the community. I loved my students. And I also couldn't help but see the disparity and challenges that we were facing and just wanted to be doing more.

Ashanti: You know, much of the work you have done throughout your career has really been rooted in advocacy for marginalized communities and communities in need of support and access to resources. Talk to me about the moment you knew that this was the direction you wanted your career to kind of progress in. Was there a defining moment? Was it teaching in this Navajo Nation community?

Nancy: Yeah. Well, actually, for me, it was, there's no specific defining moment. My parents volunteered with community organization, non-profits, religious, cultural activities. And they spent time weekends and evenings, you know, out and about. And my mom was a special ed teacher and would take me to work with her. And my dad was very involved in local civic activities and political activities. And I would go with him to different programs and advocacy and work political campaigns from a very young age. So it was, so while there was no defining moment, you know, this is how I grew up. And so I didn't, I truly did not know that other families were different.

Ashanti: It's really, so it was really embedded in your DNA. It's a family business, isn't it?

Nancy: Yeah, it was my norm.

Ashanti: Let's shift gears a little bit. When did you first gain a solid grasp on the issue and root causes of homelessness in Los Angeles County? How did you start to get into that particular sector?

Nancy: Well, after, after grad school at UCLA, my first position was as the social worker for Tribal American Children's Center, which was in Southeast LA. And I work with the families and the students. And as part of my position, I did a lot of home visits. So I saw how people lived in our community and they were crowded into apartments, many shared garages, some were unhoused. And working with the local agencies, I came to really understand that the extent of the problem, not just in my neighborhood in LA, but in throughout the city.

Ashanti: When you think about the issue of homelessness in our communities, do you view the work that needs to be done to address what's happening in LA County as social justice work? And if so, what does that mean to you and how you've become involved in this work?

Nancy: Well, it's definitely social justice work. And I am active in some civil rights and civil liberties organizations. And we have always tried to bring that into the bigger picture within

these organizations. This, you know, so to me, economic rights includes but not limited to the right to food, clothing, housing, health care, jobs available and support. And so everything I do seems to be involving social justice. And for some positions in my career, it was actually part of my portfolio. And there were others where I had to be much more circumspect on my advocacy efforts. But I used to give a little talk to social work students about like, in your mundane first job, how to make social change.

Ashanti: As you know, Santa Monica College is set to launch its homeless services program this fall, 2024. And the program is really meant to provide those who will be the boots on the ground, helping those to find themselves who find themselves homeless with the skills that they need to effectively do that work from a holistic approach. Tell me about how the program came to be because I understand you were very instrumental in making this program a reality.

Nancy: So it meant actually a number of years ago, a friend, Meredith Berkson, who was working for the county and had been working with homeless services, asked me to join a small group of people that have been talking about the needs. And they were agency heads and local government folks. We started talking. And so we talked about the lack of resources, programming, workforce retention problems, service availability, and policy. And we discussed the large number of positions that were unfilled. And at that time in the county, I think it was something like 1500 available jobs and homeless services. And so this meant that people who could have been getting more services and the funding was there for it, really weren't. So we were concerned about that. And also retention was low. They were low. It was low wage jobs. And people often entry level didn't really have any training. Some agencies had good training. Others, you know, didn't necessarily weren't necessarily able to do it. And so we talked about standardized training was one of our topics. And a career ladder allowing employees to advance, hopefully receive higher wages and continue their education and career trajectory. I was I was the education person.

Ashanti: I think a lot of people that I've spoken to so far that work in this sector, they really have a passion for it, right? There's something that drives them to do this work. What about this particular issue of upskilling the homeless services workforce really pushed you to help connect those who could make this program happen? Why did this really become a passion project for you?

Nancy: So and when I'm passionate about a needs or a cause or, you know, a problem, which which is fairly routine for me, I always feel if you I need I'm passionate and I want to see change. And so I need to be part of the solution. So as I started working more with people seeing the problem on our streets and thinking about what could I do? I just knew that if we could we started talking about upskilling. And I knew that that could be a game changer for communities. And then and so, you know, the vision, the vision kept growing. Like, OK, we could have a curriculum and then, you know, people can come to class and they would all have a standardized training. And then, you know, and then I was sort of expanding it to the world. But anyway, but you have to start in your community and your backyard. And so I went to our college president, Dr. Jeffrey, and told her about my working group and, you know, what what I

thought this program could mean to our communities. And also that, you know, Santa Monica College is an innovative college. We're not afraid to take risk. And I thought this was a good place for it to be its first home. So she offered on the Dean of Academic Affairs, Trisha Ramos. And I, of course, went right to Trisha and talked about my group and invited everybody to meet her. And we started basically an industry group, advisory group, from that little group that I had been talking to for years. And that's I haven't stopped talking about the programs. And I have to say, and we're talking like six years here that this group and I have been talking about it. And I still am talking about it. You know, I'm at an event and somebody comes up to me and what, oh, what are you doing? And I'm like talking about this program. And, you know, and I think it's coming for all of us in the program. We're just really, really excited now that it's coming to fruition.

Ashanti: It really was such a long time coming. The moment that you found out that the program had been approved at all levels and the first cohort would start in fall 2024. How did that make you feel? What was the first thought that popped in your head?

Nancy: Oh, I was so I think I was ready to cry. I was so happy and grateful and relieved. And I was smiling, and I smiled, but I'm not like a big, you know, that's not what I do all the time. But I could not stop smiling because I was just so, so happy to think that we were actually going to make this real. And I was very, very proud of SMC for taking on the challenge and then bringing very many caring and talented folks to the team. Because it's grown since we've, you know, been developing the program. And so today, it just happened today, we had a Zoom with the very first cohort that's going to start in, I guess, two weeks. And just so people could sort of meet each other. And they were asked to say, what's one word? And the cohort is really diverse. We have folks who have bachelor's degrees and people right out of high school, people who have lived experience. And so, and that's part of having being a pilot is to really learn as much as you can. So some of the words that they said were exceptional, excited, grateful, anxious, optimistic, amazed, too good to be true, curious, appreciation, apprehension. And people were so happy, including, you know, the folks who are going to be teaching in the program and the administrators.

Ashanti: It must feel so rewarding to actually get to see this first cohort of this program that really started as a thought years and years ago.

Nancy: Yeah. And, and just interesting people. And it's, it's very, it's just very exciting. And of course, now it's real, you know, before it was just kept, we kept talking about it.

Ashanti: The goal of the SMC homeless services program is really to duplicate it at other community colleges in LA County. I've heard you will be presenting at the Community College League of California annual convention on the trajectory of this program. How important is it to spread the word about this curriculum so it can be duplicated not just in LA County, but more broadly across the state and to other states and even as you said earlier, to the world.

Nancy: Yeah. It's critical because just to do, well, first of all, we're investing a lot in the program. But just to do a program like this for a small community isn't really addressing the bigger problem. So for us, this is a start and we want to make it really easy for other schools to, to incorporate programs within their school, their community, and also be able to personalize it because we're all a little different. So this was important to all of us. And what we're talking about now too is, you know, from what we learn in our, in our pilot cohort, actually taking it on the road and involving other community colleges and working with them and doing training and letting, you know, helping them learn from what worked and what didn't work for us. Nobody has to reinvent the wheel, particularly as it's already approved by this, you know, the state chancellor's office. So this is a program that's like, you know, it's good to go. So I think everybody's excited about that. And I hear folks are even getting calls from outside the state now who are hearing about it.

Ashanti: This is kind of the dream state here then for this program for you is to hear that there's interest outside of the state to hear that people want to know more about how SMC was able to make this happen.

Nancy: And, and it's, you know, besides addressing the problem, the people who will be part of the program, you know, it could lead to career pass and, and new jobs and more education. And it's just going to change lives and hopefully, you know, be part of the solution and addressing the problems in our community. You know, as we know, the needs not going to go away anytime soon.

Ashanti: As you mentioned, you know, this is getting this program off the ground is a huge win, not just for Santa Monica College, not only for the sector, but also for the students. How are you hoping to see the program evolve in the next 5 years, 10 years?

Nancy: Well, I think what we're talking about the expansion of the program to other schools. And then in terms of the individual students, you know, I hope, and I think we will be following them, you know, I hope to see that they're working, they're promoting, they're continuing their education if interested, and they're taking leadership roles. And, you know, it's like one person at a time, but, you know, it becomes, it becomes a crowd. And I think it would be great. And also that, of course, those that are impacting getting good service.

Ashanti: Are there other areas from a program offerings perspective that you think SMC could continue to grow surrounding the homeless services sector? And if so, what does that look like?

Nancy: Well, I think we're looking at it now. And one of the areas we're looking at is an AA degree in social work, which of course, I would be very excited about another one, because that's one of, you know, one of my degrees. And I believe social workers can really change lives. And it's good to have us in many different workplaces. And also that students go on for an AA degree, they might transfer, go to a four year school, get masters, and just really be giving back to the community regarding homelessness, or also just to the greater community, you know, just having feeling the need to really do something.

Ashanti: Is there a dream state that you have for how educational institutions like Santa Monica College continue to address this issue of homelessness? Is there something else that you think we could be doing more of from a program perspective?

Nancy: Well, I think we can also be doing more, because we do like workforce development, and we could be going into agencies as well. So, we can have students, but also we can, we can sort of spread the word on what we're learning and go to varied places and help them set up their programs. And so do more of that, do consulting, like, you know, a couple of folks who had, were interested in our program. And so, but I could see us doing programs with municipalities, bus companies, training, or at least establishing curriculum and then helping other people get into it. I think it's fairly endless, because as I said, you know, it's, this problem will be with us for a while. We don't have enough capacity for housing at this point.

Ashanti: What would you say to not only this, this new cohort that's coming in to this program and starting with a pilot semester, what would you also say to folks that were considering going into this sector, considering taking the homeless services program at Santa Monica College? What, what are some words that you would share with them?

Nancy: Well, I shared a few this morning when we met. But yeah, I just think for the people going in the program now, my message is, this is the pilot, you're the first, we're going to learn a lot, you're going to be, you're going to be part of the, you know, what you do is going to impact the future of programs. And you're the innovators, and you're, you're so significant, because they, they truly are, because if the cohort's going to teach us a lot, and that we're counting on the students to do that.

Ashanti: Dr. Nancy Greenstein, thank you so much for sharing your insights and expertise with us. Thank you for joining us as well 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.