

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 4 Leepi Shimkhada (Date)

Title: Public Health and Homelessness - A Call to Action with Leepi Shimkhada

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

public health and homelessness, Leepi Shimkhada, Housing for Health, permanent supportive housing, homeless services, housing first, community health, affordable housing, wraparound services, health equity, homelessness prevention, public policy, harm reduction, integrated care, social services

ID3 Tag Keywords:

homelessness, public health, Leepi Shimkhada, Housing for Health, affordable housing

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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, we'll 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 her entire career in community health. She's been on the front lines serving as a homeless service worker on Skid Row in Los Angeles, and in doing this important work, she lives by the motto of one of her most influential mentors, whatever it takes. She has a master's degree in public policy analysis from Claremont Graduate University and is an adjunct professor in Santa Monica College's Homeless Services Program. Currently, she is the Deputy Director of the LA County Department of Health Services Housing for Health, which funds and connects critical services to homeless populations. Leepi Shimkhada, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Leepi Shimkhada: Thank you, Ashanti. It's nice 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 now in your current role?

Leepi Shimkhada: Wow. Okay. So my first job. I was probably somewhere between 14 and 15 years old. And it was a night job. So I used to go as my dad to a local newspaper where we were the ones that would put on the addresses with these steel plates that we would just send through really, really quickly all night long so that it would be bundled up in the morning so that it'd be ready for distribution. And so we used to do this from, oh, I don't know, about 9 p.m. till about midnight once a week. And I got a lot of time to spend with my dad, which was really fun. As a teenager, you don't really know how to navigate that. But this was such a different space to be in with him. We were working together. We were colleagues in a way. But also seeing the hard work. And I think that's what I really learned was that he did whatever it takes to support our family. And I wanted to be side by side with him to earn a little extra money as a teenager.

But it's hard work that gets us through everything. And we could do it together. And so those were some years that I really cherish now looking back. It was hard, but that's what made us who we are today.

Ashanti: Yeah, I think that foundation probably helped you and even guiding you towards your current role. specifically around homeless services. But that's not exactly what your initial goal was. Tell me about the career you initially saw yourself in and how that kind of evolved into what you're doing now.

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah, as far back as I can remember. Maybe. What do you want to be when you grow up? And I remember sitting there thinking, what do I want to do? And it popped out of my mouth. I want to be a nurse. And I just kind of lived by that. And I really did want to. I just didn't know what it meant to be. But what I had in my mind was to be a public health worker, to be out somewhere in the community. this big organization like the World Health Organization. Go around the world, do nursing and do public health. Right. And so that was really like my earliest and my desire to do that. But, you know, then life intervenes and things don't always go the way you want it to. And, you know, when I was in school, which was a really long time ago, nursing programs were really impacted. And so I was waiting year after year to get in to be a nurse. And I just couldn't wait any longer. And I thought, well, where do my credits transfer? And I looked up community health and I was like, oh, my God, this is what I want to do. I'm so glad I didn't get into a nursing program because this is where I want to be. And I had amazing professors who taught us so much about being on the front lines and how to do the work, how to build budgets, how to design a program. And this was all in college. I thought this is this is it. Right. And that's why I went and did a public policy degree, because then I could do it at a broader level and still get that. Sort of idea from early on to impact a greater population.

Ashanti: It's so interesting, this idea that really we're always exactly where we're supposed to be in the moment. Right. So there is a reason you just didn't get into the nursing programs or like, you know, we're waiting for space to open up. You ended up finding this other thing that probably was more aligned to what you wanted to do. What you're doing now, I want to talk a bit more about Housing for Health and tell me how that particular area came to be and what its function is. Talk about that.

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah. I'm so, so thankful that I was here at the beginning. You know, my my history in like homeless services was really on the ground and I went and did housing. So I was at, you know, our our county's, you know, housing department. It's sort of de facto that and, you know, learn so much there about production and, you know, what it means to build housing. I mean, she's amazing. She's like, we're going to create this benefits program and it's going to be out of the health department. I absolutely want to be a part of that. That's something I want to do. So I made the jump from housing to services and really start to understand, like, how do you start to marry those things? Because both are so, so necessary. And so at the time, the health department had, you know, an interest in trying to do some boutique sort of homeless services. We had a very small housing program, a small benefits advocacy program, and a recuperative care program. And when I say small, I mean, really just testing things out at the pilot stage. And so this is going back to maybe 2008. And we were just a tiny, tiny little special programs department, kind of just whittling away and doing the work. But then we got this new director who came from San Francisco who had sort of tested this housing for health type model. health type model there. And he came and he said, well, this special programs unit is already kind of doing it. Let's just kick the doors wide open and do it at scale and get out there and get the units and do the services. And so that was really where it started about 2012. We had Dr. Mitchell Katz come from San Francisco. He brought a whole team of amazing people who are still there.

And we just kind of grew and we built and, you know, we had this sort of budget to do what we needed to do. It was such a time of innovation and testing and seeing what worked and seeing what didn't work and really being able to scale up and scale back things so we could really fine tune it to get to where we are today.

Ashanti: You started with four staff members. Where are you all now?

Leepi Shimkhada: [chuckles] So I was one of the first four. So if I'm recalling correctly, I was probably staff number three at the time. If you fast forward to today, we are at about 650 people. Our budget started somewhere in the two digit millions, right? Maybe 10, 20 million. We're at about an \$800 million budget now. I mean, it's just exponentially grown and I couldn't be more proud of the work that we do. We have really adhered to our mission. We still require, it's in our contracts, whatever it takes, right? And it's so nebulous, but we train to that. We make sure that, you know, all of our contracted providers understand what it means, whatever it takes. You know, and it's just something that lives with us. You have to live it. You can't just, you know, mail it in. This is about people and lives and we're impacting and transforming. And so, being able to do whatever it takes is critical for people who have been disenfranchised for so long.

Ashanti: Housing for Health has really seen a lot of success through the last decade. Can you talk to me? About some of the wins, also some of the losses and how you see Housing for Health evolving and moving forward. You know, I understand the goal really is to work yourselves out of a job. So let's kind of look at what that journey has been like over the last 10 years.

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah. So, you know, sort of going back to my learnings in public health, you know, I had an amazing professor who said, you know, if you're going to do public health right, you're going to work yourself out of a job. And that means you ended, you know, a pandemic and whatever it may be, and you can sort of rest. And so we're not, we haven't rested yet because, you know, this is an epidemic that has just grown. And we do need to do a lot more. We're so fortunate right now to be in LA County. You know, we have amazing, an amazing public here who just decided to pass measure A, which is going to then, you know, continue the sales tax that's dedicated to homeless services and now housing production and also for prevention. So we do need to do more. We need to create some innovation. Some of our wins, I would say, is just the expansion in the work that we do. We've been able to house about 22,000 people. And we have a 92% retention rate, which means people stay. People want to be housed, right? And it's about the intervention. It's about the program design that you offer so that people want to be there. It's not just about housing. It's about creating community. It's about going home and feeling like you're home, right? And so you want to stay there. We do house a lot of complex folks who are, maybe have not been, you know, medically treated for a long time. So we do lose a lot of people too, in the sense that they pass away because they finally, what we find, it's interesting, if you talk to other homeless service providers, you know, people have survived on the streets for so long with so many untreated medical conditions. And as soon as you house them, there's a group of people that, again, just kind of rest and take a breath. And then they die with dignity. It's almost like they were waiting for that. And so, you know, when you look at that 8% that is not in housing for the year, it's a lot of, it's a lot of death and dying, you know, and so we're dealing with a lot of that too. And so we're trying to support our providers, you know, in that kind of loss and trauma because they see it every day. I mean, we're the administrators, we're the funders, it's sort of vicarious trauma for us because we get close to a name, but we don't actually know them. support. So that's, you know, those kinds of things are the things that we need to figure out. How can we do better? How can we get people indoors sooner so that we don't have that kind of loss, right? And so those are the things that we want to

fine tune.

Ashanti: You talked a lot about the frontline workers and kind of the stress that goes along with that. There's a lot of preparation that kind of takes place in order to get someone ready to do something like that. I think this is a good time to shift gears a bit and talk about Santa Monica College's Homeless Services Program. Talk to me about the first time you heard that this program was in the works and what was your response? Like, was that a surprise to you that a college, especially a community college, was creating something like this?

Leepi Shimkhada: My first was, oh my God, I can't believe it. I was so excited. I was so excited. So, you know, I've been a part of various different training, teams and being able to sort of really interact with people early, early on in the early, I don't know, like mid-2000s. We had this United Homeless Healthcare Partners, which was sort of this umbrella organization. And we did a lot of training and certificates through that. And we required a lot of our frontline workers to go through it. But it was not this formal education, right? This is something that I kept thinking, what if? Why can't? You know, it's always the why. You know, we have, for drug treatment, you can get a certificate, you can get a certificate for like being a certified nursing assistant, but homeless services really didn't have this. It's always been sort of this peer model program. It's very grassroots, right? To come up through homeless services, but we're at a point in time, it's almost like this inflection point where we do need to think about how do we professionalize this and make it enticing for people to want to come in and do the work. You know, for me, just going back to my history, I did not, know what it meant to like marry these things and how do I be of service, right? Because some of us just have that. We all want to be of service, but how do you do it? And so you take these different disciplines and you sort of put them together and become who you are today. But maybe if there was a homeless service work program early on, maybe that's what I would have done, right? And then I could get a degree in it and continue my learning. And, you know, this is why, this is why it's so exciting that Santa Monica College has stepped up and taken that risk and taken a leap of faith to say, we believe in this, that we have a sector that is growing. And for me, knowing that there are thousands of jobs out there that we just can't fill. I mean, again, I look for my administrator hat. I look and see all these gaps in services because agencies just can't ramp up. And, you know, we keep saying, go higher, go higher. We've got the funding, but if they just can't find the people, we need a pipeline of people ready and willing to come in and accept the job. Because the jobs are there. So that, this was exciting when I started to hear about it. I really wanted to be a part of it. However, it didn't even have to be about teaching it. I was like, I'll help you write it. I'll do whatever. But the two amazing women, Celina Alvarez and Vanessa Rios, they just put their heads together and just knocked it out. I mean, I can't thank them enough. And Celina, I've known for at least 25 years, we started working as frontline workers in Skid Row. So I knew she was going to do it right. And to have that, I mean, it's just so amazing to have the backing of Santa Monica College to say, yes, you know, this is, this is the curriculum. And so I threw my hat, I threw my name in the hat. I interviewed, I said, I'd love to teach. If you accept me, great. If you don't, you don't. But I got chosen and I'm so, so thankful. I'm so honored. It's been such a ride. It's been amazing.

Ashanti: If we talk about the labor force that's going to be needed, that's really needed now. It really makes this program that much more important. How much more important is it to you? How much more important is it to be able to duplicate this program at community colleges across California, even across the country?

Leepi Shimkhada: We need this. I mean, immediately. I mean, we have our first cohort of 20 who it's, they're great. I mean, they come from so many different walks of life, but we need 20 more and 20 more and 20 more until we can fill the first 1300 jobs. Right. And so, yeah, if we

can expand this into all of the community college districts throughout the state, we'd be in really good shape. And we do need, you know, other sort of champions of this and other, you know, regions to be able to launch a program like this.

Ashanti: You mentioned how excited you were to be able to be an instructor in this program. And this is the first cohort that's come in. Obviously, this is new for everyone, right? For the students, for you, for the college. How has it been so far? How have the students in this first cohort been? How have the students in this first cohort embraced the curriculum? Are you seeing a group of students who are really interested in going into the homeless services field? Tell me about this journey so far.

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah. You know, getting to know people, I still reflect on day one of orientation back in August. You know, none of us knew each other. We're trying to get comfortable. And by the end, and so we just had our last in-person meeting this week on Wednesday. And to see the evolution and to see these folks just starting to learn and to see these folks just starting to bloom. I mean, you can just see it and the confidence. And so we did a check-in and it was great because our other professor, Dr. Elisa Orduna, I'm so thankful she was my partner in all of this as the other, teaching the other class. She asked a check-in question at that initial orientation and then re-asked it again at the last class. And just to really talk about like, what are you most proud of? Like, what was your accomplishment this year? And they all have embraced it. They all are ready. They want to do their internship. We're talking about what path you want to take. Some want to do outreach. Some want to do like, you know, long-term services and housing. Some want to work in public policy setting. So everything we've sort of been able to dump this year, like I feel like I want to take everything in my brain and just give it to them, you know, because we have to create our future leaders, right? This is a succession plan for some of us. A lot of us are ready to retire. We want to get out of it, but also want to do it in a responsible way where we're leaving it to a group that will believe in it and have the same passion that we started with, right? And so they're incredible. I do see, I would say almost all of them will go into the sector. Maybe one or two might, you know, continue on with their education. But this is an incredible group. I mean, we've got some folks who are current Metro bus drivers, working in coffee shops, some former teachers who really want to be a part of the solution, right? And so that's what we need. Is this a groundswell of how do I be a part of the solution? And that's what grows, you know, the population of wanting to work in this.

Ashanti: What has surprised you the most about this first semester of the program? And what have you learned so far as the semester comes to an end that you can kind of take with you into the next semester?

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah, I think what I've learned just from a practical perspective is really about how to be that professor who communicates often and a lot, right? And so that's one of the things that I feel like I want to work on for the next time I do this, learning the technology, you know, for all of us. I think there were challenges for just not myself, but also some of the students. We're going to fine tune that. And I think also some of the reading material, you know, really getting them relevant reading material, right? Because what we keep talking about, at least in my class, because it was the health equity class, talking about how we make this an equalizing, you know, intervention. How do we make sure that, you know, the housing that we're building gets to the people who need it the most, right? And then how do we do the wraparound services and make it equitable for people? How do we make access available? And those are the things that I think I get to talk about, but also I get to work on at a policy perspective in my job. And so knowing that I'm teaching this, it also holds me true to what I need to be able to

consistently work on in my daytime job, which is, you know, making sure that people get housing and they get the services that they need.

Ashanti: You know, the work that you're doing on a day-to-day basis, it's not easy work, right? There's a lot of stress that comes with it. There's a lot of, I'm sure, disappointment sometimes. What keeps you showing up day after day to continue to do the work?

Leepi Shimkhada: To me, if I'm not doing this, I don't know what else I'd be doing, you know, because I think there's something in me that is just a need to be of service. I think I'm a very sort of like driven person in politics. I think I'm a very sort of like driven person in politics. I think I'm a service. That's what I've started to learn about myself now that I'm a lot older. But also the wins. Every day we do house somebody, right? It's a person. We have impacted their life. And there's hope for transformation for them. It's not just about change. And I, you know, my dear friend Celina told me there's change. You can always go back. But transformation means you've become somebody different. And you, we are changing their life arc so that they can be healthier. They can, you know, get the mental health services they need. And they have a rental subsidy that will keep that unit affordable. Let's get real. In LA County, we all probably need a rental subsidy. It is expensive here. And to be able to give that to somebody who then can use it to get better and to get back into society, connect with family, make it a home, is everything. So that is what keeps me coming here every day.

Ashanti: In the years that you've been doing this, if you really had to think about what you would do to solve this issue of homelessness, given that you had no barriers, given that you had all green lights, what is your dream state to try and really work yourself out of a job?

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah. Housing, and housing, and housing, and more housing, and then some services with that. You know, I think we really need a public policy strategy, in this country that really focuses on how to end it. We've done so many things over the years. I'm thinking, you know, at the federal level, we have these, you know, now you're going to make a 10-year plan to end homelessness. You know, you can't just do like an end-to-end plan. I mean, you can, if you're going to invest in all the housing. We're a million units behind in affordable housing. So part of it is prevention, right? And the housing, and the services. I mean, we need to be able to reduce poverty in this country, right? That way, that's the prevention strategy. You need to be able to increase affordable housing production. That's our solution. And you need to increase services funding so people can retain the housing, right? So if you look at the prevention, the solution, and, you know, the retention part, you could solve it. But it really does take this collective awakening in our society to feel like we all need to be part of the solution. Right now, we still, you know, have a lot of NIMBY. And, you know, there's neighborhoods who say, you just can't build here. You know, it's NIMBY and banana, right? Build absolutely nothing anywhere. And so, you know, that's not just neighbors. That's also some elected officials who don't believe in it. And so if you don't have this collective awakening, how can we ever solve it? So I would say housing, housing, housing, housing everywhere so that everybody has access. Because you don't know if the teacher up the street, the teacher teaching maybe at my kid's school may not be able to afford housing. So then they move four hours away. What kind of quality of life is that? Are they going to be an effective teacher? Right? So it's just this domino effect of like, how far upstream can we go to really prevent it? We're talking about for every one person we house, we have two people falling out, you know, and so it's low wages, it's high rents, but yet all of it falls on the shoulders of the homeless system to solve it. And it is always under-resourced. So either resource the homeless system to be able to take care of the failures of the upstream, or fix the upstream so that they're not constantly flowing down here. But right now we have such a mismatch of here's more people, go do it, but yet you didn't do good enough. And look at all this

money we gave you, right? And so you've got the richest man in the world yelling about homelessness right now and housing first, but if he wanted to actually have a solution, give maybe 1% of that revenue you have, maybe you could actually help solve it. Right? I mean, those are the inequities in this country, right? And so it is a structural issue. It is not a program model issue. People have been structurally, you know, taken out of different situations that could create stability for them. It's a way for us to keep making excuses. And not actually doing the funding that we need to do.

Ashanti: Do you think we can get there to this dream state of housing, housing, housing, housing, and services? Or do you think that the structure can be improved so that everything is not falling on the homeless services area?

Leepi Shimkhada: Yeah, the structure can be improved on. There are numerous other countries we can look at that have done this and have done it well. You know, we don't always have to accept the narrative that we can't build our way out. You know, that's something. That's a narrative we've all accepted. We all say, we can't build our way out of this because, you know, there's just, we can't build fast enough. We don't have enough funding, but why not? Right? But why not? Other countries have done it. If you look at Finland, for example, they actually start to disinvest in shelter beds and just went to permanent supportive housing. And they said, that's all we're going to build now. And they've solved it. You know, there's things that they've gone to functional zero where they're, they're able to, but it also took champions in government, elected officials, you know, local business leaders who really believed in it, which then changed the narrative for the public, right? To say, this is who we are. We care about our people. It's a humanitarian crisis. It is not acceptable in our country to be like this. And we are going to be part of the solution, right? So it's really the sort of mind shift about, do we want to be humanitarian in our way of building our way out of this? And I think that's a really good question. I think it's a good question. you know, whoever, whoever makes it and makes the next \$3 billion is successful and everybody else just going to have to figure it out because that's kind of where we are today.

Ashanti: I would love to end this by asking you about any advice you would give to those who might be interested in going into community health or homeless services. What would you tell them if they were considering this work?

Leepi Shimkhada: It is incredibly fulfilling work. You know, if you have a drive to serve, this is the best place to do it. And I'm going to just toot our own horn at Housing for Health. This is the Housing for Health place is the best place to do it. We are the best in terms of being able to take care of our staff. I think the growth has been exponential, but we have been so, so fortunate to be able to do it in the health department. We have been able to do it in the health department. We have been so well supported by our leadership and being able to grow this. You know, I have an incredible boss. I'm going to give her props here, Sarah Mayen. She's amazing. I couldn't do this without her. I stand on the shoulders of so many strong women who have really helped me get to where I am to be able to do this work. And that's what we need. We need to bring in more people who believe in it. And so if you believe that you can be, you can make a difference. You can make a difference, a little bit of change. You know, it doesn't have to be at the policy level. You can do this to case manager. I, you know, like I said, I started doing case management and being able to change the lives and transform the lives of 36 people was huge. And that's where I really learned, you know, everybody had a different story. Everybody has a different pathway and some are going to make it, some aren't, but the ones that don't doesn't mean we stop trying. We try again and we try again and we try again until it's time for them. So I always say right place, right time, right? What's ready for me might not be time for you. And so it

takes time to build relationships and engagement. And so if you're a young person or an older person who wants to get into this field, you like to engage with people and you want to take the time to help transform someone's life. This is the place to be, you know, any of our contracted providers that we work with just on the permanent housing side, we work with 65 different contractors in LA County. They are all incredible providers doing such hard work every day. You could go work for one of them. They're the ones that have the 1300 jobs open, you know? So come, come be a part of the solution. I would love it.

Ashanti: And do whatever it takes, right?

Leepi Shimkhada: Do whatever it takes. Sometimes you just got to buy somebody a soda and engage, right? And it's as simple as that.

Ashanti: Leepi Shimkhada, 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. Thank you for joining us on Doing What Works Innovations and Homeless Services, I'm Libby Shimkata. We'll see you next time.