

Educating the Homeless to Advocate for Their Rights

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Dear Mr. President,

As a long-time admirer of the outstanding work the NAACP has done over the years, I enjoyed having the opportunity to see how you function from the inside. As you indicated during the General Body meeting, the challenges facing our citizens today require leaders who have a fresh perspective of the issues and who offer and pursue with passion the successful implementation of solutions so that the NAACP can continue to serve effectively.

Therefore, please accept this proposal as my self-nomination for Chair of the Education Committee and for Community Education Leader of a new movement to train homeless men and women to advocate for their right to fair, humane treatment and equal protections under the law.

As you know, God asked me to move to Newport on a leap of faith with no money, no job, no housing. He specifically told me that there existed a great community problem for which He would show me the definitive solution. Given my lack of resources, I had to check into a Providence shelter. God kept me at Crossroads for exactly 40 days and 40 nights during which time I experienced and witnessed other residents being subjected to an established course of maltreatment at the hands of the staff and security personnel hired to advocate for us and keep us safe. I have published many of the details on the Coalition's *Walk a Week in Your Shoes.com* campaign website.

In short, I observed how the peculiar institution of slavery is alive and thriving amongst this vulnerable population where service providers reign as their masters and the homeless passively submit as their mental slaves. Just as new prisoners must yield their material possessions, shelter residents are required to check their dignity, self-respect, self-confidence, self-determination, recovery from life challenges, past successes, and future dreams at the door upon intake. Just as prisoners are locked away in a tiny cell, staff attempt to place residents into a box of inferiority via the pre-defined categories they assume best describe all homeless individuals—addict, mentally ill, disabled, no high school diploma, etc. I say attempt because I refused to be put in any box other than the box of humanity.

If “the Negro” were replaced by “the Homeless” in the book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Dr. King would be describing the current state of oppression of the homeless—and the solution. He recounts the five steps slave-owners followed to “train” a good slave. First, as one master said, “The slave must know that his master is to govern absolutely and he is to obey implicitly, that he is never, for a moment, to exercise either his will or judgment in opposition...” For example, Case Advocates regularly miss or show up extremely late for appointments with their homeless clients. Oftentimes, they are present in the office and simply choose not to see their client. Whenever residents speak in opposition, the staff responds with elevated hostility and a flippant attitude of, “That’s life. Deal with it.” They established a sense of if you want your needs met to get out of here, you have to wait on me. They established a sense of almighty power. The verbal attacks by the guards which I personally endured also attempted to poise them as my ruler and to put me in my place. When I refused to submit or be intimidated, I was repeatedly called the devil, a troublemaker, high maintenance, or prodded about being too good for them.

Second, the masters implanted a “consciousness of personal inferiority” which was “deliberately extended to his past” to make slaves “feel that African ancestry tainted them, that their color was a badge of degradation.” During my initial intake, the Case Advocate asked if I *currently* had any mental health, addictions, disabilities, or domestic violence issues. When I negated all of the above and stated that I was simply unemployed, she asked if I *had ever* been depressed or the like. I answered truthfully about my past traumas which led to depression, alcoholism—for which I am now 10 years sober—and suicide attempts 14 years ago. She immediately marked my intake form with “long term mental illness, suicide ideation.” No indication on alcoholism. When I told her that did not accurately describe my current experience, that I have actually made a living helping others to heal based upon my healing journey, she

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refused to correct the form. I did not want to escalate the situation because I needed a place to sleep. However, I *knew* my present truth. My spirit stood firm in the beauty of that truth and, in that moment, I knew that this must be part of God's plan. Each time the Case Advocate met with me thereafter to complete my referral to the HPRP program, she instead tried to make me get a mental health diagnosis so that she could place me in Riverwood.

The final three steps of the training process described by Dr. King are “to awe the slaves with a sense of the masters’ enormous power,” to make the slaves accept without question “the master’s criteria of what was good and true and beautiful,” and “to impress Negroes with their helplessness: to create in them a habit of perfect dependence upon their masters.” Just nine days after arriving at Crossroads and experiencing this disheartening treatment firsthand, God gave me the vision to draft a Bill of Rights for the Homeless. Five days later, He led me to a community forum on homelessness in Newport where I spoke about this vision. Former Congressman Bud Cicilline approached me afterward and pledged his support. The following week, I researched, wrote, and submitted the bill to Mr. Cicilline. He immediately forwarded it to President of the Senate Teresa Paiva Weed. Two weeks later, I met with him and Deb Johnston, the executive director of the McKinney shelter in Newport. After hearing my story and the leap of faith that led me here, Ms. Johnston offered me a room in one of their transitional housing units. After 40 days and 40 nights at Crossroads, I finally left for Newport—God’s original destination for me. Through my dependence upon and strength in God, my true master, I got out. Some of my roommates at the shelter who believe they must wait on the Case Advocates to complete much needed paperwork and provide referrals are still there.

Interestingly, a few weeks later, the HPRP Case Manager at Crossroads contacted me and offered me the opportunity to participate in the program. Initially, she agreed that I could find my own apartment in Newport. However, after the HPRP Housing Locator decided that I should live in an apartment on her housing list in a low-income area, she refused to return my phone or email messages. Instead of allowing her to have the final say over my life, I contacted her supervisor after 48 hours passed without a response from her. They called a surprise meeting between the HPRP Housing Locator, two Case Managers, and I where they insisted they would help me *if* I moved to an apartment they chose for me in East Providence. I respectfully declined citing that I was already established in Newport and had several community commitments on the Newport County Reentry Council, Social Action Committee of a local church, and as a fundraiser for the McKinney shelter. I also told them that spiritually Newport was my home. They transferred my case to the HPRP administrators in Middletown. A shelter roommate who has fallen under this spell of helplessness and non-responsiveness by the Housing Locator still resides in the shelter.

Just like Dr. King, God has called me to fight the discriminatory practices and abuses levied against the homeless as an oppressed minority of our community. As a solution, the homeless “must unite for political action to compel the majority to listen,” to quote Dr. King. The day after the General Body meeting, I awoke with God’s vision for the Community Education proposal which follows. Although the jail cells have been replaced by check boxes of inferiority and billy clubs replaced by psychological beatings, the fight to free the voiceless and the powerless in our community remains the same. I have committed to God and commit to the NAACP to lead and finish this fight.

Very respectfully,

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