



January 18, 2024

Our Call to Serve Vulnerable Populations in Our Communities

As followers of Jesus, how do we imitate his care for the poor? How do we invite the wider society to consider the most vulnerable in our midst?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus' love of neighbor was visible, consistent, and unconditional. Today, our efforts to reach out to those in need is sometimes muted by efforts to criminalize homelessness, keep certain types of housing out of our communities, or assume any housing is sufficient regardless of the physical, mental, or emotional needs of the person in poverty and their fellow residents.

When confronted with hardened attitudes, it is incumbent to remember that care for the poor is one of the recurring themes throughout both the Old and New Testaments. As such, care for the poor is a consistent focus of Catholic teaching and action. As Pope Francis stated, "each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 187). Care for the poor is not optional for the Christian.

The hard reality is that an increasing number of people are experiencing homelessness. The 2022 Point in Time count suggests over 25,000 are either experiencing homelessness or on the brink of homelessness. Christ beckons us to serve those in need.

We can give thanks to God that so much of our work for the poor is provided through our three Catholic Charities entities and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Catholic Community Services and Catholic Housing Services of Western Washington, Catholic Charities Serving Central Washington and Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington are the largest private social service providers in our state. They serve people living in poverty, offering housing, food, behavioral health services, legal services, childcare and more. Members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society offer person-to-person service and support to individuals in need. Catholic Charities and Community Services house individuals and families and have specialized housing for seniors, veterans, farmworkers, and those with disabilities. There is also a program to help families build their own homes and become homeowners. As an integral partner in Washington's homeless services system, we understand that housing is the first step to moving people out of poverty, provided it is the right type of housing with the services a person may need to stay housed readily available onsite. For some individuals, those services may be extensive, requiring an assisted living-type of environment; for others, service needs might involve access to mental and physical health care, substance use treatment, employment assistance or something as simple as rental assistance. Other services care for the growing aging population in our communities.

It is especially important to recognize that some individuals will have complex needs, such as a serious mental illness or a debilitating physical condition. Inappropriate placement of individuals who are so medically complicated, so medically ill, so profoundly suffering with mental health and addiction issues that they are not appropriate to be living in the housing to which they are referred leads to situations where a person in deep need becomes a danger to themselves, other residents, and staff. Homelessness is brutal; any housing placement should be a safe, stable place to heal from the trauma that leads to homelessness and is inherent in the experience of homelessness. As we strive to provide aid to the poor, laws and policies that hinder the ability of providers to serve and ensure the safety of residents or fail to provide appropriate funding for the level of care needed must be addressed.

Every portion of our state needs more affordable, deeply affordable and permanent supportive housing capable of providing the level of care that meets the needs of residents. Every community, rural or urban, must increase access to physical and mental health providers and substance use treatment for people with little to no income so they can be successful neighbors. Workforce development of well-trained individuals to serve these populations is also needed. The Washington State Legislature has shown a commitment to finding solutions for the many challenges that keep people homeless, but there is much more work to be done.

As the shepherds to one million Catholics across Washington, we urge parishioners to join the Washington State Catholic Conference as we call on our state legislators to continue to invest in adequate and appropriate care for individuals with acute needs who are also experiencing homelessness. We encourage Catholics to advocate for a more effective coordinated entry system that looks not only at which people have the most need but also at which housing program is the right fit for that individual. We also invite Catholics to advocate for state laws that reduce barriers for individuals in need of assistance while protecting the health and safety of all residents within permanent supportive housing units, such as promoting active case management and access to behavioral health treatments while also ensuring that criminal activity is deterred. Finally, we ask Catholics to raise their voices in support of measures that address the drug epidemic in our state which leaves addiction untreated and needed housing units unlivable due to residue from unchecked drug use.

We also encourage the faithful to serve the vulnerable through parish ministries and volunteer work. Support parish and community food banks, join or begin a Pregnancy and Parenting Support (PREPARES) program at your parish to assist families in need, serve meals or provide temporary shelter at your church, and learn more about the work of Catholic Charities, Catholic Community Services, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in our state.

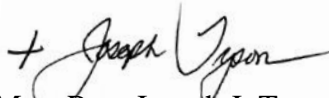
In a nation and state of such great wealth, no person should spend their golden years in a shelter or on a city street, no family should ever worry about where they will spend the night, no one should ever lose the roof over their head because of a temporary economic crisis, and no low-income individual should have to accept a dangerous housing environment. Our neighbors experiencing homelessness are individuals of equal value and dignity to any other Washingtonian. Let us raise our voices to remind political leaders and each other of that essential truth and fulfill our call to be an instrument of God for their liberation.

As pastors, we bishops close with the ultimate expectation Jesus proclaims for everyone at the final judgement: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Matthew 25:35-36

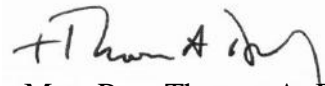
In the heart of Christ,



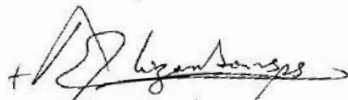
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Most Rev. Joseph J. Tyson
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