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The Experiences of Asylum Seekers who are Temporarily Housed by Faith Communities while Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain deeper understanding of the experiences of homeless asylum seeking individuals who were temporarily housed by families in the greater Portland area. In response to the need for housing for asylum seeking families, three local churches founded a housing initiative in 2016 to provide temporary housing and other assistance when the beds were full at the local family shelter. While literature pertaining to the role of faith-based organizations in helping displaced persons is abundant, few studies focus on the experiences of those hosted by faith-based organizations while seeking asylum. The current study seeks to gain understanding of this phenomenon from the perspective of those offered hospitality through this faith-based initiative.

Introduction

The greater Portland, Maine area has become a popular destination for those seeking asylum due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular group. After leaving their home countries and all of their possessions behind, many arrive in Portland with very little, including having no place to sleep.

Greater Portland area family shelters have provided tremendous support for many asylum seeking families, providing them with temporary housing and case management services as these families create new lives in a new land. Unfortunately, however, there are times when the demand is greater than the capacity of the shelters and families are asked to spend nights in municipal office buildings on plastic chairs.

Starting in June of 2016, several faith-based organization began offering temporary housing to asylum seeking families who otherwise would have no place to sleep. To date, this housing initiative has housed over 10 families comprising approximately 40 people for over 60 days. This study captures the experiences of four of these individuals who were homeless before being hosted through this housing initiative while seeking asylum.

Objectives

- Provide an understanding of the experience of being homeless in the greater Portland area while seeking asylum.
- Identify the benefits of being offered housing and companionship while experiencing homelessness.
- Identify aspects of the program that asylum seeking individuals found most beneficial to inform additional communities interested in creating similar programs.

Themes

Theme One: Welcomed and Supported by Host Family

- “We arrived in Portland, no place, no beds. The shelter called Yarmouth people to see if they had a place there. They said yes, and someone came to get us at the shelter. We were just standing up in the office, if no one had come we would have had to spend the night standing up. When we arrived we were given a place to sleep, a room, very comfortable.” (Participant 4)

Sub-Theme: Accepted with Love, like Family

- “The children were very much at ease, and even called the woman ‘Grandma’. It was really very comfortable and we all felt at ease. Love was very much present. We were very happy there, and am very grateful. I thought “these people really had love to give us” (Participant 2).
- “We show them our cooking, our, how we cook food in Africa, we share our food, we share American food, so we, we develop a kind of family. It was not just assistance, so we develop, we build a kind of family, now there is people that is considered like our family.” (Participant 1)

Sub-Theme: Relief of Stress, Restoration of Hope

- “We felt like we were just out on the street. Arrived in Yarmouth, we had a place to stay, so our fears were allayed, our concerns were lessened. We were calmed” (Participant 4).
- “When I get in Yarmouth, I felt that, oh God, thank you God, you helped me, because I was embarrassed. I was in darkness, so the light come in...and then I get peace in my heart.” (Participant 1)

Sub-Theme: Continued Relationship and Connection with Host Family

- “Our experience, the relationships still exist, so that gives us a memory of the people that have helped us along the way, who are friendly, who are good, who have continued to help. So that’s the memory that I have, of the enduring relationships. The help continues. And not just us, but other families that have come after.” (Participant 4)

Theme Two: Welcomed by Individuals in Larger Community

- “They saw my kids, and they connected my kids to other individuals, American people living in Portland, who want to help. So they helped voluntarily, without having a kind of organization.” (Participant 1)

Theme Three: Challenges of Starting Over in a New Land

- “When we arrived at the shelter, it was a long trip, and we arrived there in the afternoon, and we had no food and no place to sleep, and we were very discouraged.” (Participant 3)
- “I tried to tell the kids this was temporary, and it will be better, but it is hard for children to understand. ‘Why didn’t you bring our whole house here, why didn’t you bring our car here?’ It was really beyond their comprehension. It’s hearing the children asking these questions that really gives heartache.” (Participant 2)

Methods

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology examines how culture and lived experiences form our perceptions regarding a given phenomena; that what we take as reality, is very much subjective (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

- Four individuals participated in loosely structured interviews, three with the help of interpreters.
- The participants consisted of two married couples, each of whom were seeking asylum as a family with their children.

Results

The interviews conducted during this research project revealed three major themes and several sub-themes. Each participant indicated they were welcomed openly and offered tremendous support by their host family which extended beyond simply being given a place to sleep at night. Participants reported being welcomed into their host family’s home as if they were family, and feeling a sense of love from their host families. The hosts gave the participants and their families privacy, freedom, autonomy, and trust, which allowed them to reconnect with the identities they had at home before coming to the United States.

The relationships with the host families were unanimously described as friendships that endure to this day, and all participants indicated that their host families have reached out to them repeatedly after their relatively short stay in their homes asking if they need assistance and offering their help. Not surprisingly, after arriving at the host’s family house, participants indicated they experienced great reductions in stress, as well as a restoration of hope in place of feelings of despair.

Research participants also indicated receiving significant support from individuals from within the community that were not affiliated with the housing initiative. These individuals often voluntarily approached the participants offering assistance, such as helping to find furniture or offering transportation, despite having never met them. The greater Portland area was generally described as welcoming to and concerned about the well- being of those seeking asylum.

Lastly, all participants detailed the difficulties of the starting a new life in a new land, often becoming emotional when recalling the feelings of despair they experienced upon arriving in the greater Portland area, hungry and tired, only to learn that there were no beds available at any of the area’s family shelters. Conditions at local shelters and soup kitchens were described as difficult and chaotic, and the participants were surprised to see the conditions in which homeless Americans lived. It was particularly heartbreaking for the participants to try to explain to their children that despite their difficult circumstances, things would get better, and they were at least safe from the danger and violence they experienced back home.