

EveryHome™ Housing & Community Development Awareness Event

Representatives of the Pennsylvania Association of Housing & Redevelopment Agencies (PAHRA) recently gathered in a show of solidarity at the State Capitol to promote awareness of the positive impacts of the provision of safe, secure, accessible, affordable housing for Pennsylvania's senior citizens, disabled persons, veterans, the working poor and low-income families with children; as well to publicize the continued demand for additional affordable housing and related services within our Commonwealth communities.

This marked PAHRA's 4th such annual event held to support and recognize the importance of housing and community development in overcoming obstacles in the lives and communities of Pennsylvanians beyond brick and mortar such as:

- supportive services for seniors
- ending veteran homelessness
- stabilizing families
- encouraging education and economic self-sufficiency
- connecting communities

PAHRA President Senghor Manns pointed out that although the typical perception of homelessness brings to mind those in shelters or on the streets, a large majority of the homeless exist out of sight:

- couch surfing or sleeping on the floors of friends and family
- squatting in empty or abandoned buildings
- sleeping "rough" in tents, campgrounds, or hunting camps
- parents and children crowded in cheap hotel rooms staying week to week because they don't have enough money for a security deposit and one month's rent upfront

Featured speaker, Belinda Albright, Director, Office of Veterans Affairs, Northumberland County shared her story in a soft, sincere voice, describing her journey into homelessness, which began when her husband, the sole breadwinner of the family, became ill and was forced to leave his job. The couple moved into their station wagon; however, Mr. Albright suffered a heart attack and passed away following heart surgery.

Alone and widowed at age 50, Belinda retreated to the privacy of the mountains, where she lived until running out of food. Emerging from the mountains, she took to staying in hotel parking lots until her presence was detected and she was asked to leave. Filled with shame, Ms. Albright had been hiding her homelessness, but eventually sought the help of friends. This did not last long since she felt as if she was imposing. Finally, she found refuge with her father, who had not been aware of her situation as she had kept it secret from him out of embarrassment. With a roof over her head, she worked menial jobs until learning of the vacancy in the Office of Veterans Affairs and "By the grace of God, I was hired", she declared.

Ms. Albright has been Director of the Northumberland County VA office since 2010, and is very active in her professional community. She has two children and four grandchildren. She is a member of Parish Council at St. Pius X Catholic Church, drives bus to pick up Susquehanna University students for Mass on Sunday evenings, and lectors at Mass when the university is not in session.

Currently, Ms. Albright is focused on raising funds to establish RallyPoint, with the goal of purchasing a local farm, which will be used as a shelter for homeless veterans, including a growing number of female veterans and their children. Social services, including drug and alcohol counseling, will be available, as well as agricultural training in hydroponic farming.

Similar to Ms. Albright's situation, it is estimated that 62% of homelessness is hidden. According to www.ReThinkHousing.org, a startling 76% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, just one injury or illness away from the risk of losing everything. Statistics indicate that 44% of our nation's homeless are actually employed. PAHRA will continue to advocate for adequate funding for affordable housing and related services, to help insure that every citizen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has a place to call home.