

Testimony by Eve Stevens of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax 03.13.2014

Good evening everyone. I'm Eve Stevens. I am the Intern Minister at the Unitarian Universalist congregation here in Fairfax. I got the chance a few weeks ago to spend some time with the folks who were being sheltered in our chapel as part of the Hypothermia project, an interfaith sheltering program in Fairfax County. On average each night we had 88 guests. Our volunteers put in a total of 2,454 hours cooking, cleaning and getting to know people who are not supported by the Fairfax County community. There were people with mental health and addiction issues that were not being addressed. There was a young woman who had survived being pregnant while homeless but had to put her child in foster care because she could barely support her own life, let alone two. There was a twenty year old man, who could have been interning like I am to start the career of my dreams, but instead he was sleeping on our Chapel floor.

The cost of housing these 88 unique and precious lives for a week cost \$14,900. There were more than 25 communities of faith participating in this program. Even assuming that our congregation's costs were higher than average, this amounts to a total cost of more than \$300,000 with 55,000 volunteer hours. The message is clear. Our resources are limited, but our resolve is not. These volunteers from a variety of faith communities poured hours of their time into the Hypothermia project because they feel a deep sense of responsibility to the other human beings living in our community. The fact is, when we waved good bye to the homeless men and women we'd spent a week with there was a weight in the pit of our stomachs because we knew that we had not fixed the system. We had put a very expensive band aid on the problem of homelessness and it will face us again next year and the next and the next.

Our congregation has been committed to changing the system that creates poverty and homelessness for over twenty years. We passed a congregational resolution in 2006 stating our faith commitment to housing those who are homeless. Since then we have participated in Habitat for Humanity construction projects; we have supported the proposed 3-2-1 commercial rate policy and Fairfax County's 2011 Blueprint for Housing; UUCF members helped build the community support that led to the Embury Rucker Shelter for homeless families in Reston and our congregation led an interfaith Soup Kitchen that became Our Daily Bread.

As a faith community our resources are limited but our resolve is not. Our congregants have shown that they can offer at least 2,454 hours of their time and commitment to solving the problem of homelessness and poverty, but we cannot do it alone. Police, detox workers, mental health counselors,

and FACETS are a few examples of the good people and good programs working in Fairfax County to end homelessness and increase the availability of low income housing. But it is still not enough. Rent for an efficiency in Fairfax County is \$915 a month. In other words, rent consumes every dollar that a person working full time at minimum wage can possibly earn.

We are asking that Fairfax County partner with our faith community. We are asking that businesses that will profit greatly from their locations near metro stations give back to the community that makes their existence possible. 67,293 people live below the poverty level in this county. Eighteen thousand of those are children. The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness is supposed to be fully realized by 2018. But the way things stand today, it is more likely that many of those children are destined to sleep on the floor of our Chapel for a week in the winter and then struggle to survive hour by hour after that. We are asking that Fairfax County make this a priority. Without Fairfax County's financial and legislative commitment to changing the current system things will stay the same, no matter how fervently our congregants work to advocate for affordable housing and an end to homelessness.