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Mpact Podcast Episode 63: Homelessness and Public Transportation

This episode presents the plenary conversation about homelessness from Rail~Volution 2022 in Miami, with Stephanie Wiggins, CEO of LA Metro; Leslie Richards, General Manager and CEO of SEPTA in Philadelphia; Diana Stanley, CEO of The Lord's Place, a homeless services provider in south Florida. Our moderator is Daniel Gibson, Regional Vice President, Miami-Dade, for Allegany Franciscan Ministries.

Photo in graphic courtesy Stephanie Wiggins, LA Metro

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Welcome to the Mpact Podcast. This is Tamar Shapiro, CEO of Mpact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. We are excited to have recently announced both our new name and tagline, Mpact: Mobility, Community, Possibility. We're a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how to leverage transit to make communities better for people.

Jeff Wood: Hey there. I'm Jeff Wood, principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the Mpact Podcast, we're going back to Rail~Volution Miami for the Tuesday plenary. Daniel Gibson moderates a panel featuring LA Metro CEO Stephanie Wiggins, SEPTA CEO Leslie Richards, and Diana Stanley, CEO of homeless services provider, The Lord's Place, to talk about homelessness and public transportation. Stay with us.

Tamar Shapiro (1m 12s): All right, so to get the panel started today, I actually am going to welcome the entire panel to the stage. But along with the panel, I'm also going to welcome Flora Castillo, who is the president of Pivot Strategies. LLC. Flora is a nationally recognized leader in public transportation, mobility, and public health, and previously served for over two decades as a senior policy maker and member of the board of directors of New Jersey Transit. Flora is also a member of our board of directors and it's Flora's passion for the topic that's going to be discussed today that actually brought about this panel.

It was Flora who first said, let's organize a panel on transit and homelessness for the conference. And as you can see, it happened and we're really thrilled. So I'm going to welcome Flora to the stage

Flora Castillo (1m 59s): Good morning everyone. Tamar, thank you so much for making this panel a reality. As you mentioned, this is a topic and an issue that I care about, and indeed it is a great opportunity for us here at Rail~Volution to have this very timely conversation on what our leaders are doing all across our country in terms of addressing the issue of chronic homelessness.

It is my pleasure to introduce our moderator for this session. Daniel Gibson, regional Vice President, Miami Dade, Allegheny Franciscan Ministries, a community leader who overcame obstacles by discovering his voice in resiliency. Daniel has dedicated his career to advocating and serving communities where equity and opportunity evade those without a voice.

He's a proud champion of criminal justice reform, the eradication of chronic homelessness and the removal of inequities of poverty, race, and sexual orientation. He is a singer, an actor, a Broadway lover. Please help me welcome Daniel to the stage.

Daniel Gibson (3m 32s): Well, thank you for that. And last time I share my personal information. Good morning everyone. And I have to say, I am crazy impressed that you transportation junkies actually are here the day after Halloween. So happy day after Halloween. Thank you for being prompt and being here. I am delighted to be here today to engage in this conversation. I am a social justice junkie and have dedicated my career in that.

I always like to say that I infiltrated philanthropy about seven years ago as a community based organizer. I jumped onto that bandwagon in order to see money being put into our community. But the homeless issue is something that has always been - and also men coming out of prison who experience homelessness - has always been something really important to me. I do apologize. I do have a theater background, and so for all you there who can't see me from here, that's not my fault. It's bad blocking. All right.

So I apologize the actor in these dying. Okay. And the only other thing I will share before we get onto our fantastic panel is about six years ago when I joined Allegheny, I was invited to a conference, a regional conference that happens out here called Safe Street Summit. And it was at that conference that I met all of you. I met individuals who did not work in the community-

based sector, but who worked in the government sector. They were electricians and, and, and, and architects.

And I realize you all talk crazy different language than I talk, but we all worked towards the same thing. And one of my goals was to see more community-based organizations present in these conversations as well as foundations, public and private. And so I'm just so delighted when you all ask me to be part of this, and also I'm happy to be a sponsor of this day. And with that being said, we're going to introduce our fantastic panel here. And the first person whom we are going to introduce is actually from my home town, which makes me really, really excited.

We have Stephanie Wiggins and I, I promised I wouldn't read everything on the list here, but the one thing that I found quite interesting is that you are the current CEO of METRO in Los Angeles, which is the second or third largest metro system in the country. And you are the first African American woman who has been in that position, which is just, I always like to applaud.

I could go through the rest of all of your accomplishments, but I, I think that you probably could do a better job of sort of sharing with the audience of who you are. So very nice to have you.

Stephanie Wiggins (6m 23s): Thank you Daniel. And good morning Rail~Volution. Good morning. Good morning. Again. My name is Stephanie Wiggins. I am the CEO of LA Metro. I think I've been in transportation for almost 30 years. I started when I was five. And you know, I, I really applaud Flora and Tamar for allowing this conversation to happen because I think when I think about transit recovering from the pandemic and doing it in an equitable way and a rapid way for LA Metro, the biggest challenge we have is homelessness.

The biggest challenge we have. So I wanted to start out with just a photo, because I believe a picture is worth a thousand words and hopefully the photo is up. Yeah, it's up. Okay. You know, this is a photo of a bus stop outside of Union Station in Los Angeles, and it's pretty indicative of the issues that our region is facing now. This person has taken over a bus stop with their possession, blocking our customers from using the bench and shade structure.

And if you know anything about what's going on in LA, the whole issue of bus shelters is also an issue, particularly an extreme heat climate areas like Miami, right, where there's not enough shade and shelter. And what you really see here is a bus shelter has also served as a default homeless shelter for the unhoused on our system. So if you know what you're looking for though in this picture, there's a different story that I wanted to tease out. And that is that this bus stop may have a metro sign, but it's actually owned by the city of la.

The bus shelter is in the city's right of way, and it's their property to maintain. But the property behind it is Union Station, and it's owned by LA Metro. And here's another part of the story. Our customers don't care about any of those distinctions. They don't, but it is indicative of what we've been experiencing around homelessness is that there's a lot of, you know, this going on and there's a lot of compartmentalization, but there's really not enough coordination.

Our customers don't want us to hear us complain about that. They want a clean, safe, and reliable system, and they expect us to give it to them. We recently published our annual customer experience survey, and the number one issue from our customers is the homelessness issue. We've seen a decline in ridership by women on our system. We think it's a safety and security issue, in part because of the homeless issue. And I will say this before I close this for Metro, our position about homelessness is that it is not a crime.

The issue isn't that people are homeless on our system, it's that they're sheltering on our system. And more importantly, it's those who may be experiencing a cognitive crisis that are really the security challenge where we need for mental health professionals. So since 2017, Metro has been investing its own dollars with paying for homeless outreach support services. We've been leveraging our own property by encouraging and incentivizing affordable housing being built on our land.

We've permitted over 3000 affordable housing units and continue to do more. We have a project labor agreement where we specify for contractors to hire disadvantaged workers, including those who are formerly homeless.

Daniel Gibson (10m 3s): And that's amazing to me. I think we're going to spend some time talking about services and delivery. Yes. But you've already touched upon many of those things. And as a native Los Angelino, again, it's just the fact that transportation agencies are actually now having this kind of language in their mission is just amazing to me. So, but we'll get back to that.

Stephanie Wiggins (10m 21s): No problem. Okay.

Daniel Gibson (10m 22s): More to come. All right. More to come. All right. Next in line is we have Ms. Leslie Richards, who is the c e o and 11th general manager of Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority. And that is the sixth largest public transit system in the country. And I, I was just impressed with your budgets. I think yours is 7 billion, is that right? And yours is a \$2 billion. Can you imagine that, Diana?

That's not, and it's not enough. Wow. Wow. Okay. But in the same vein, I will sort of allow you to introduce yourself to the audience and let us just know who, who and what you guys are.

Leslie Richards (11m 6s): Just a few things. I have a short video that I'd like to share, but before I get into that, so in addition to currently being the general manager of SEPTA, before I came here, I was a county commissioner, a couple, a couple positions before that. But what that was very helpful for was dealing with social services, dealing with housing issues, dealing with a lot of the issues that, the challenges of helping those who are experiencing homelessness come about.

And I also wanted to thank Flora and Tamar for, for bringing this to, to as a topic here, it is so important. And I agree with what Stephanie said. You're like, we're, we all see each other as other individuals, right? Caring individuals, and we want to help those experiencing homelessness and dealing with drug addiction and dealing with mental health issues. But we also want to help our customers who really need us at that time. So the way we approach this and, and what I've learned from being an elected official and then going to state government and, and now in my job here, is there are problems that I don't know how to solve all the time.

And sometimes that's hard to admit. So what we did, especially as the pandemic started and we saw this becoming a problem, is I just, I, I didn't know where to start. So what I did is I, I made a commitment to myself. I said, every day I'm going to make two calls and I'm just going to call people, let them know what we're experiencing and ask for their help. And that's what we did. And I started with my friends in Health and Human Services and then I moved on to my friends in the academic institutions.

And then I moved into my friends in law enforcement and just kept going. And every time I would have a conversation, they would say, we want to help you. Some would know how and some wouldn't. And that's how we came up with our SCOPE program. And so in March of 2021, we introduced our SCOPE program, which stands for Safety, cleaning, ownership, partnerships and Engagement. And it's gathering all of those different perspectives and skillsets and working with other organizations and government entities and nonprofits, because together we need to work on this.

This is definitely not a problem. Transit can solve. I wish we could, but we need to work together. And so I'm thrilled. Just a few weeks ago, we were awarded the National Innovation Award from APTA and for this program. And so we put together a short video and I'd just like to introduce the program that way, and I look forward to the conversation. So for those who can play the video, please, please do so. Now,

Video: (13m 48s): On any given day in the poorest big city in the United States, SEPTA stations and vehicles are sometimes the only refuge for vulnerable individuals experiencing homelessness, substance use disorders, and mental illness, a challenge heightened by the pandemic as the anchor for the region's recovery. Septa developed the SCOPE program to bring a holistic, compassionate approach to providing a welcoming travel experience for returning customers, ensuring a secure environment for employees, and connecting vulnerable people to vital services and care. This unified response allows SEPTA to maximize personnel, establish a culture of employee engagement, and develop partnerships with diverse outreach specialists and stakeholders.

Sheltering on transit isn't safe for anyone, and working with the Scope team helps us actually engage people where they are. Through contact and trust, we're able to create pathways to housing, health services, and employment for individuals that are seeking new services.

Transit is the way we connect to each other through Scope. SEPTA's 9,000 employees are finding new ways to fulfill that mission every day.

Leslie Richards (15m 16s): First of all, I want everyone to know that this was an employee driven effort, right? It came from our employees and in working with others to figure it out. But the first line in that video was, you know, Philadelphia is the largest poorest city in the country. And we felt that in, in new ways throughout the pandemic. And so we knew that we had to do something different and something that will make a difference.

Daniel Gibson (15m 46s): Thank you so much. Sure. Beautiful video. Also, last but not least, Ms. Diana Stanley. And with full disclosure, I'm in love with this woman. I like you guys too.

But actually, when Tamar was first thinking of this panel, she asked me to be on the panel because of my background in advocacy for homelessness. And I said, no way. I'm not working in it directly right now, but I know the best person to do it. Who is my current mentor, and my former boss, Diana Stanley. Diana Stanley is the current CEO of the Lord's Place, which has the mission of ending chronic homelessness in Palm Beach County. And actually, I would say throughout the country.

And I'm not going to read what they have here, just to say that you are one of the most dynamic people who I know hadn't seen her in three years because of this dang thing called Covid. I left about seven years ago. And just not only, you are a mentor and a friend, but you are the strongest and most outspoken advocate I know for the homeless community. And I really am excited for the audience to hear and learn from you today.

Diana Stanley (17m 2s): Thank you. So good morning. I love being in a room full of subway people and best people and taxi peoples and all those things. So it's so great to be here. And really thank you for this conversation. And Daniel's right, I'm extremely passionate about how we serve the homeless. And we have been watching this for years. I've been at the Lord's Place for almost 16 years, but have been committed to homelessness, poverty, people that are vulnerable in our community for probably close to 40 years. So I am their voice. And so when I get a chance to be among these wonderful people to say, let's not forget that we've got a problem, but that this is all symptoms of a much bigger problem, and that is homelessness in America today.

So the question I always say is, why, why are they there? You know, why are we dealing with this from the subways and from the train stations, from the bus stops? And the question really comes down to the reason why is because we still have not figured out in this country how we deal with homelessness. We pour a lot of resources into it and we continue to do that, but it's a much deeper conversation. So there's three things I want to walk away. I want, I wanted to share with you this morning, just three very quick ways to approach this high level, medium and low.

And I'm not going to get a services going to, you're going to talk about it. But let's start with the high level. You all are people of influence. And one of the things that I have yet to see from a policy standing perspective is the fact that we have not coordinated departments from the federal level to dis to to deal with this issue. Department of Transportation needs to be talking to the Department of Health and Human Services under HUD and figure out how do we help each other? Where's the funding to make this work?

Right? Cannot do it solo. They have to come down. And I share that with you because 13 years ago, Daniel, and I remember when the Department of Veterans Affairs were all upset because the home, the homeless veterans correct, were walking the street. And we went and we advocated and we said, guess what? Department of Veterans, you need to get together with Department of Health and Human Services. You need to figure this out. And lo behold, they went ahead and they produced what was called a VA voucher. That VASH voucher today has almost eradicated homelessness.

And for so many veterans, that's the conversation that needs to be happening. You all had the chance to make that happen. Go back to your congressman, go back to your senators and say, department of Transportation cannot do this alone. Bring health and human services together. So that's the high level one. The second one is to really talk about community impact. I know we're going to talk about that a little bit more, but I will dive into that. Guys. Everyone needs to be talking in the community. You all need to be sitting at the C O C, which is Continuum of Care Homeless system. And if you don't have a C O C, I heard you did not.

I don't care what your system's called, right? Make sure you're sitting at that table. As we're addressing homelessness, your voice needs to be heard. And as a provider, I want to hear what you have to say. I want to hear about what's happening. This is amazing, this scope, by the way. I'm like jumping up and down. This is so cool. So we're going to take that back to Palm Beach, but love that. And then, so we need to have that conversation. Don't let your voice be quiet. Sit at those tables, talk to the homeless providers, talk to other providers so we can figure out how to resolve this.

And last, but most importantly, for me, it's the boots on the ground. It is the engagement. It is loving those individuals that are finding refuge and safety in our bus stations and our train stations. Let me remind you that when we see a homeless individual that is someone's brother, that is someone's son, uncle, mother, daughter, sister, we see them experiencing homelessness. But let's never forget that that is an individual that needs to be treated with the same respect and dignity. And I think all of you understand that. And now what we have to do is come together and find some solutions to a much bigger problem, which is homelessness.

So thank you so much for letting me share that with you.

Daniel Gibson (21m 2s): And now the show begins. So I, I actually always love to share this when someone is silly enough to give me the moderating o p opportunity and not give me questions to ask, but allow me to come up with questions as the conversation goes. And y'all

are very brave to allow me to do that also. So we have not preset anything. And you all kind of already addressed one of the first questions, which is just how, why, why, like, how did this happen? And so I I, I would like to dig a little deeper into the why.

It's an issue we have. We obviously have heard that there's been an uptick in, in homelessness throughout the country, period. And then their presence in the transit system as well is something that you all have sort of referenced. I, I'm really interested as you all, oh, actually, and I want to ask the audience, just so we know who we're talking about, who just by a show of hands, works for a government entity and has incorporated homelessness into your mission by a show of hands. Oh wow. All right. Great. We got a couple. So applaud those who raise their hands.

Thank you.

And who in room is maybe as a community based organization who addresses homelessness, still not hitting that target? We are going to fix that next, next meeting. We're going to fix that. We need to get Yeah, you, so you are the representative today.

And so my question to you all, because we're not, you're not represented your organization's bravery to take in this as a mission that you were going to talk about. What did that look like? How did you guys make, not why, but how did you make that change and how did your organization receive that, that duty and either of you?

Stephanie Wiggins (22m 42s): Well, I think first for Metro, it came from our board. Our board asked us to partner with the county on C3 teams, community county, and city outreach teams. And for metro to fund those teams to be dedicated to our system. So that's how we first got into it. And I have to admit, as a transit agency, we got into it kicking and screaming. Cause we were like, this is not our issue. This is not our issue. This is their issue. Right? But the reality is it was affecting the customer experience and the quality of the service that we were providing.

So I, and I'm proud in the audience as one of our board members, director Fernando Dutra, who actually is on our board. And really just last week, past a revolutionary new motion. It says, now we're going to coordinate with the county, we're going to explore services and have this partnership on how we address homelessness.

Daniel Gibson (23m 38s): And and would you say that was just a very sort of overnight smooth transition? Or how long did it take for you all to say, yes, we're going to incorporate homeless services into our mission? Or how is that, has it formally been introduced into sort of your scope of services?

Stephanie Wiggins (23m 53s): It, it's never formally in our mission. It was in our scope of services as of 2017. Okay. But I think when our board did last week is they officially said, you know what, we're in the transit service business, not the homelessness business. And we're

going to work with the county and cities. And more importantly, the county now has says we're going to work with you

Leslie Richards (24m 16s): Well, it's very interesting, you know, as they all say, you see one transit agency, you've seen one transit agency. So our story is very different. First of all, just so you understand, when I came on in January of 2020, I know I have great timing, right? Started this job. Our board is conservative and majority Republican. And when I came on the pandemic hit us, if you remember it hit New York, Philadelphia, Northern, it, it hit us very hard. And in fact, I remember speaking to the chief of staff at LA Metro, I was reaching out to everybody at the time, in early 2020s before you had come aboard Stephanie.

And at, at this point, we had just lost our seventh employee to covid. Wow. And hundreds were, were were impact, you know, we're, we're coming down with Covid, right. Were positive cases. And I remember speaking in LA and they said, well, we had one case at this point, and I couldn't understand how we were feeling so hit by the, by Covid and others weren't feeling it yet. We were seeing it homelessness in a different way.

And so I, instead of it coming from the board, I had to go to the board and I had to say, we have to do something and we have to deal compassionately and sensitively to this issue. And it's a business case issue because if we don't figure this out, no one is ever going to come back. We are, well, there'll be no reason for us to run the system. And I will say the board got it immediately. They understood. We have their full backing. But I must have heard, I can't even, I forgot how many times, "Leslie, we're not a social service agency. We're a transit agency." I heard that over and over again. And I said, however, we're not a transit agency if we have nobody to take anywhere. Right. And so again, they got it immediately. But that's how it started for us. And then, you know, with the board's full support, in fact, we went from spending around 30 million on law enforcement and safety and cleaning. We, we now spend over 50 million and that's all the board's support in doing that.

And, and we'll spend what we need to to make sure that our system is safe and people feel safe on our system. And we are helping the community as well.

Daniel Gibson (26m 42s): Wow. Thank you for that, for that, that journey of story. And, and same question to you. How formal is your, your commitment to the community and your mission, your vision and your, the scope of work? How formalized have you all made that?

Leslie Richards (26m 56s): Yeah. Well, we meet on a regular basis with, with various different groups. I talk about it wherever I go. I talk about equity wherever I go. And I talk about our challenges with the vulnerable population where,

Daniel Gibson: And the scope program is specifically for the homeless. Correct?

Leslie Richards (27m 11s): Correct. It's about combining, you know, policing in the right way, social service, advocacy in the right way, cleaning yeah, in the right way and making sure everybody is working together. And, and again, I talk about it wherever I go because I never know when I am going to be in an audience of someone who can help us. Yes. And I know we're going to go into the details, but that's what's happened. I talked about it and the president of one of our universities was there and said, I want to get my medical students involved. I talked about it and an advocate who worked with a, a local organization of people with lived experiences one day at a time was there. And our consultant started engaging with them as well. I love that. So you never know who is listening and you never know who can help you. So I talk about it all the time

Daniel Gibson (27m 57s): . I love that. So, Diana, jumping over to you and your verbal music to my ears, right? Explain that. Why is it music to your ears that, that they are not seeing it as their core service? Yes. Why? Music to your ears?

Diana Stanley (28m 12s): And I was thinking about that. If there are people that are now thinking about how do we really start serving the homeless and not ignore them, like you really kudos to you also for housing like another hallelujah. But I will tell you, let's, let's talk about how we do that. I think if you are part of a transportation system and you really want to start addressing this, the very, very first thing you need to do is you need to find your homeless provider in town. You need to go over, sit down, have a cup of coffee with the executive director, the c e o, and say, tell me about your outreach. Tell me about your engagement, se engagement piece, and then let's start connecting that.

I share that because so often folks, what happens is people start hiring people for their own versus working with already established nonprofits, already established community partners that are experts. So our, our engagement team really is quite interesting. And we take care of the

Daniel Gibson (29m 4s): What's an engagement team?

Diana Stanley (29m 5s): Engagement team is our outreach team. So the same folks that you saw meeting with the individuals that are experiencing homelessness in the train station is what we refer to as our outreach team or engagement team. Very interesting. Every single one of our folks at The Lord's Place that does outreach, they are what's called lived experience. So they are peers. What does that mean? They can sit next to Johnny, who they see sitting there at the subway station or the train station, say, Hey Johnny, I used to sleep here. Time for you to get up and get moving.

Let, let's get you over to The Lord's place. And the reason that I also promote making sure you're connecting with, with the community provider is because you can only do so much, right? We, we have a a we have a scope of services, right? That we can connect them to housing and job training and clinical services and if they're reentry, reentry and culinary training. And so a nonprofit allows you to expand those services. We were talking yesterday

about when do you pass the baton, right? When does the baton go from your world to our world?

My suggestion is let it start in our world. Let it start in our world so we don't have to pass the baton. So if you're thinking about doing this, find that homeless provider. If you need help, call me and start having those conversations about how they can go out and start reaching and taking care of the people that are experiencing homelessness in your neck of the woods.

Daniel Gibson (30m 26s): A and I just a follow up with that as when, again, when Tamar introduced this conversation to me, I was blown away that transit agencies in such large organizations were even having this conversation. How does the Lord's place r does the Lord's place even currently work with transportation services to address this?

Diana Stanley (30m 46s): And no, we don't, not not the way that I'm hearing from here. So I'm going back, going back to Palm Beach, here I come, we're going to do it, trust me. So we'll go back there and do it. And so we, we don't, I mean we've done it as you know, we go to the train stations, we go to the bus stations, you know, we know about all our little people that living in the bus, things we know about. We love them, we love on them and love on them and love on them. And then we say we have to move time to scooch scooch. So we get them up and moving. But we have not had a formal relationship.

And so this has triggered for seriously for me to go back to the C o C and to really start having conversation who in Palm Beach County needs to be sitting at the table with us also so we can formalize it a little bit more.

Daniel Gibson (31m 28s): Great. 45 minutes is not enough time to talk about this. I'm going to just let you all know we have about 20 minutes left. Yes. And there are three places my brain is going. One is, I, I think some people in the room are interested in services. What do the services look like within the transit agencies? Partnerships are key. And I really want to hear not only sort of what are the great partnerships, but what are the, the challenging partnerships, both community-based organizations, politicians, politics, right? You, this, this can be a really dicey issue.

And then also sort of lessons learned. If you could do it again, things that have not worked. Those are the three things I would like to touch on in 20 minutes. So I put that out there. Don't talk too long, but give us the nuggets of what it is. But let's start with services starting with your two transit agencies. What, what does services look like? And maybe you want to start Leslie?

Leslie Richards (32m 17s): Sure, sure. So SEPTA covers a five county area. So one of the big challenges that each county has different services. Sure. Right? So you got the Office of Homeless Services in Philadelphia, but then you, we have to work with Victim Assistance Services in Delaware County Victim Services Center in Montgomery County. Then we have to reach out to Bucks County, we have to reach out to Chester. And everyone is different. And the

elected officials are very insistent. Well that person isn't a Philadelphia resident, so they don't get the Philadelphia services.

You have to go out to Delaware County to get those services. And some of the counties have more robust services than others, just depending on where their budgets are and, and how hel you know, and where they are. And so that has been very, very difficult. What our Scope program has done, first of all, what we did is it, it goes under our chief, our operations. So it falls under our chief of operations at SEPTA. And then we have an outreach services director who reports directly to the chief of operations and they run the SCOPE program.

So we have someone full-time working on this, working on the coordination. We have mobile units that go around our system that are on our main subway line. We have tabling efforts that are going on right near City Hall. And that's for helping women who have been assaulted around our system. And in, in the areas we have also tabling efforts and a presence in our hub that's in Montgomery County in Norristown.

We have one that's in our hub in Delaware County, which is at 69th Street, the main area where all of our modes meet. And we just have to make sure that we're working with everyone. A good turn of events, however, is where, where initially, and I, I want to help you as you, as you start this conversation where initially there was a lot of tension, right? Because the Office of Homeless Services was, you know, get out of our lane. We, we, we, you know, we don't like how you're doing. For us, the answer is more housing, is shelters. That's all they wanted to work on.

And I I, I was like, I cannot wait for that. There are not, there's not enough housing, there's not enough transitional housing, there's not enough permanent housing, there's not enough affordable housing, there's not enough shelter beds, there's not enough beds for those who are dealing with addiction issues right now. And, and there's not enough services. So that when someone is, is placed in voluntary, right involuntarily into service, they're discharged way too early, too early. And then they're coming right back to our system.

So we're having all of these issues. And so, you know, those, the, that's where the challenges are. But getting the services out there, we are having a positive impact. It is slow, it is incremental, like all changes and we keep working on it. But what, right before I came here, I was talking with the director of homeless services for Philadelphia and she came up to me, she said, Leslie, we get it. We get it. And now we are opening up to other solutions and we get that we need to walk, you know, in, in step with you. Like we've gotta work on everything that you're working on and others are working on and we need to deal with the housing issue. It's not just one thing. So I think that's, that's a major, you know, issue. I, I could talk about

Daniel Gibson (35m 38s): You sound like you've been working in the homeless services forever actually. Cause you're using the right languages, whole spectrum of services.

Speaker 9 (35m 45s): I think you're about to jump with something.

Speaker 6 (35m 47s): Well actually, actually, actually I go cause I, I felt the, yeah,

Speaker 8 (35m 51s): I just, I guess the question I have for both and probably for all of us is what, what do you want? I mean, do you want them to be dis what, what, what do you want housing? I mean when you engage with somebody and you expect, we want them to leave the facilities, right? But if there's no place to put them in the housing, I think that's the, that's my, that's what I wrestle with, right? So you've got your engagement team out there and they're working with the homeless in the subways and then they say, we're ready to go and you pick 'em up in your community and where do you, where do you put 'em?

I think we cannot ignore that is one of the biggest issues we have right now. So even if you do street engagement, you do community engagement, you have no place to put them. They're right back where they started

Speaker 6 (36m 30s): Trial because housing is, and I know this having worked for you

Speaker 9 (36m 36s): The exact, it's a hard conversation. It's

Speaker 8 (36m 38s): A very

Speaker 9 (36m 38s): Hard conversation and that's exactly where we we're. So we're, you know, our board is now very active also in helping get getting housing and advocacy and all of these. I

Speaker 8 (36m 47s): Know Stephanie with your housing, I'd love to,

Speaker 9 (36m 48s): Yeah, yeah. I think

Stephanie Wiggins (36m 50s): It's a little bit different because our experience is, we were just invisible to the continuum care providers and the homeless providers. I think they, they were, they, they put us on an island and they said they need to have their services through the 88 cities in our county. And they would ignore the fact that LA metro service area is within the county and operates in the 88 cities.

Daniel Gibson (37m 13s): And just for clarification, community of care, just for anyone that doesn't know is the group of HUD regulated, you gotta have a continuum care if you want to get HUD dollars. And so it's all the homeless providers coming together on a regular basis, creating their policies and

Stephanie Wiggins (37m 27s): All. So to your question in terms of what do we look for as a transit agency, if there's nowhere for someone to go, we are fine with paying for hotel vouchers for overnight. That is not the issue for us. The issue for us is the continuum of care providers don't want to provide service unless we pay for it. They don't want to provide the homeless

outreach engagement workers. Interesting. We actually subsidize a six month pilot for 24 hours, seven day a week shelter because we don't have shelters open 24 hours a day.

We did it for six months. It was not cost effective. We notified the county that we don't want to continue. They said, okay, the people, the 80 some people that are currently in the shelter, we're going to put them out on the street. That is the disconnect, right? That's the disconnect that's been there.

The, the homeless point in count. That's true. The annual count. Yep. We need time would not include metro system. That is the, that is the, the silos that have been in place, right? That disconnect. I'm happy to say as of today, our continuum care provider last month officially invited us to have a seat at the table now. They officially said we will be in the point account count point time, huge. And, and of course, you know, the significant motion by the county to say metro, you should not be in the homeless services providing system. And we never hired our own outreach workers. We always contract it out with our, our experts in homeless outreach. But the challenge is there's not enough homeless outreach workers. There's not enough mental health outreach workers. And so that's been the challenge. We just want to be seen as part of the community and not be on an island.

And I think we're headed in the right direction.

Daniel Gibson (39m 13s): Well, That is huge. And I, I just have to say, being on stage with three brilliant, successful, inspiring women, I just want to make sure that I don't come across as mansplaining. But when we talk about the, the homeless count again, cuz I didn't see a lot of hands going up, just understanding the importance of that. The homeless count happens every other year and the number of PE number of homeless individuals counted in your city dictates how much money you get from HUD And if you have a huge homeless count within the transit system, but they're not coordinating with you all, you are missing not just individuals who need services, but you're missing dollars that are due to your community.

So the fact that you've been invited, that's a huge strategy and a huge congratulations speaking for that.

Leslie Richards (39m 60s): I, I'll just say we invited ourselves, so we were part of the point-in-time count. The city is like, well we're doing well, we're doing our own. You can, you can include ours good for, or you can do your own thing. So we, we went out that night and we did all of ours and we gave it to them and we're like, you can do whatever you want with those numbers. But we can tell you that's how many people experiencing homelessness are on our system.

Diana Stanley (40m 25s): That's another reason why the Department of Transportation needs to be working in tandem with Department of Health and Human Services hud because they would've mandated that. So across the country, right? They would've just said, you gotta do it versus everybody, everybody in different cities having to go fight for it. That makes sense

Daniel Gibson (40m 40s): The cos do tend to have their own personality. They need to literally city by city. They have their own personalities. And, and so I think sort of of kind of a follow up and then we probably have in time for one more question after that is just Diana having heard that and also just I I i wasn't exactly sure in your explanation of services, how many of those positions and services are filled by your staff versus in partnership with community-based organizations. And also in what you heard Diana, did you hear any place where you thought, God, that that would be a wonderful place for an organization like the Lord's place to be there?

So I don't know who wants to

Diana Stanley 41m 17s): Start. Well every, I feel very strongly as I said earlier, that I think people need to reach out to their homeless providers that are are part of it. You know, one of the other things I want to leave you with is something just to, to marinate on a question. And that is, and Daniel and I, I talked about this last night. The question is, you know, how do we best serve the individuals that are in our transportation system knowing that we have limited resources.

And you know, here's what happened, talking to my husband about this and my husband said to you the other day, he's like, well why are you trying to displace them when they're not ready, when you know they're just going to come back? Cause we had this huge conversation versus really thinking out of the box. And so I leave, I'll ask you to think about this.

Do you, you know that people are coming there for safety issues to clean themselves up. We know all the reasons why they, because I've talked to them why they're there, right? There's safe, et cetera. The question becomes, is it too absurd for us to think that there should be a space someplace that's just dedicated for them?

Is that too absurd to think that there can come in and there can be, what we would refer to in the homeless world is the an engagement center either there or nearby, which prevents them from having to be there and we can relocate them somewhere else where that engagement can begin now and we can start, they don't have to be washing up in your bathrooms. They can actually be doing it somewhere else.

That is, that may be a lofty idea, maybe out of the box thinking. But I just keep going back to we start to serve them. We have to ask ourselves why are they there?

Leslie Ricards: So strategically placing those engagement or not, we, our board is asked us explore that navigation hubs right towards, near the end of line engagement center. So that is something we are I love it right now. I love it. Good. So

Speaker 9 (43m 9s): We that's good. So we have a hub of hope where people experiencing it's in our system. Okay. It's been there for several years now. Showers are there, washers and dryers, are there food

Speaker 8 (43m 23s): Services there for the homeless specifically? Correct.

Speaker 9 (43m 25s): Wow. And it's, it's, I mean, SEPTA did it before I got here. We've, we've helped support it. And where's it located? I've been there. It's in our suburban station, which is one of our major stations, which is also underneath the municipal services building is the, where city government is. Terrific. It's terrific. Except not everyone wants to go there either. And so there's still a lot of challenges. They still need support, you know, in what they're doing.

It's not, it's not so easy in Delaware County, we're dealing with a council member who wants to create a place for, it's like a, a park area where you can go, the services are there and that's where, but not everybody still will, will take you up on that. So what I've learned, and I've went and we've all learned so much about this, is it definitely takes multiple engagements. Yes. Right. And so I just want to mention one of the ways in which we're doing that, in getting people to that.

So I mentioned, you know, university president once, once listening to me talk about this and we talked about medical students. So Drexel University, big university in, in Philadelphia, we have first year medical school students who get credit for their first year curricula. They engage those experiencing homelessness. Say they see a cut that's not healing, they see a swollen ankle. They see and they start talking to, to members of our vulnerable population about, you know, easing their pain or helping them.

You know, it's not easy living on the streets. It's not easy. Never having medical care and, and so then they get some trust and then, and then sometimes they'll agree to go to a shelter. So, so it's those small engagements. Yes. I think we need more centers like that. Yep. Yep. But even that, I just, you know, once we would have that, I just didn't want to say that. Well then that's, you know, how we, we still need to find, you know, every way to do that.

I will also add, cuz I don't know if it's going to come up when we engage Drexel University, the university president had to call me and say, Leslie, our students don't want to work with your police because what your police, because our police are out on the system.

But it's very important because sometimes they'll engage with someone and they have a gun. Yep. They have a knife. You have to have, they just need to be like over there, what I can tell you right now and I'll end it and I'll end it right here. Now our medical students, I see them, they have the cell phones of our police chief. When they feel they need it, they call and they get along really well and they have now have an appreciation of when law enforcement is needed. And they also, the law enforcement knows when they're not needed.

So I think it's that partnership. I don't think it's one or the other. I think you have to figure out how do they compliment each other? How do they work well with each other? Yep. And I'm really thrilled that, you know, the young college students who have been very anti-police are now open up to see Oh, we know where that role is Exactly. But it's limited. Yep.

Daniel Gibson (46m 26s): Great. And I, I just want to sh give a a shout out to a local group here that is in partnership with University of Miami and they are called the homeless. No, they're called the Street Outreach Recovery Center I think of Dade County. I got that totally wrong. But, but the idea is that it, it is in partnership with University of Miami Med students and it is a way for them to engage very similar services that you're doing. And, and so I guess the one thing I would sort of add is that as I I even with the tables thing that you had, like does that need to be a transportation staff person or could it be a continuum of care staff person who is paid with some dollars from this transfer from that 2 billion you have?

You know, I

Leslie Richards (47m 11s): Just want to be clear, we have one full-time paid person and that's the person who oversees. That's the scope program. Okay. Everyone you saw in that video, everyone who tables is part of the continuum of care. Got it. We, we, we are not social service.

Speaker 6 (47m 26s): That's really important.

Speaker 9 (47m 27s): That's everybody who interacts with expert expertise in drug addiction and social service that none of them are are we work with SEPTA, none of them are employees of septa.

Speaker 6 (47m 40s): If you sign off on that,

Speaker 8 (47m 42s): I'm good with

Daniel Gibson (47m 42s): That. You're good with that? I'm good with that. So we have about three minutes left and I, that's probably not enough time to get into the politics of it all, but I really would love for each of us to go down one at a time and just offer last minute words of wisdom to the audience here. It could either be lessons learned, things you would do differently, are things that went really well or maybe both. And I will shut up and let you all start that. And who wants to start? There's so much more we could talk about.

Speaker 9 (48m 12s): Well first I'll use my minute real quick. First of all, I don't want anyone to think that this is smooth going nor is it a path that you always are improving all the time. If you went to some of our most hard hit areas, while I am so proud of everything we are doing, trust me, the advocates in that area, they're angry at SEPTA. They're angry cuz they're not seeing progress as fast as they would like some of our hardest, his areas. Kensington, you may have heard of it, it's mixed National news is one of the toughest drug addicted communities in that area.

And when we go into that area, I don't want you to think they're hugging us and thinking we, we, they're open arms there. They're like, why aren't you doing more? Why'd you have to close down an elevator? You know, because someone had been living in it and the, and they were urinating and they ruined all of the mechanics of the elevator. I was like, well we have to fix it.

You know, we, we still have hard conversations but the progress is slow but it is moving in the right direction. So my advice is don't give up.

And also we talked about how I think we are downstream from this issue. It's not that this issue only exists on transit, obviously it exists in all the communities that we serve and it also exists on our system. And so what has been mentioned is look at those upstream issues. Yeah. What can you do to help with housing? Yeah. What can you do to help with poverty? Yeah, what can you do? Help people, you know, to help people get the addiction treatments that they need. Keep plugging away at that, but also keep obviously plugging away at dealing with the people on a one-on-one basis.

Speaker 6 (49m 52s): That's great advice.

Speaker 8 (49m 54s): I would also add partnerships really matter both at the county government area, we need a champion on your board and of course in the community perspective. So those partnerships are critical. Keep working at it until you get someone who's willing to listen and open the door. I will say in terms of Leslie's point about upstream, what you can do, I'd add to that jobs, you know, we didn't talk a lot about that, but one of the things that we are exploring,

Speaker 6 (50m 26s): What does that look

Speaker 8 (50m 27s): Like quickly? One of the things we're exploring is working with a homeless provider to, when people are connected to services on our system, we are standing up and guaranteeing a, a job for up to two years, right? Because we want them to come back on our system, but as a customer not on house. And we know a job is part of that equation to housing. And so we're doing that as well. And another community partner that we haven't talked about, but I would say we are exploring is the faith community and how they can help us, particularly in the after hours, late night and providing services and access.

So again, partnerships, champions on your board and keep working at it. 580,000, that's the number I'm leaving you with. 580,000 individuals were homeless last year. That number is going to increase. Let me tell you right now, 70% of those are individuals. Those are the ones that you're seeing. So I think the takeaway from on behalf of the clients that we serve is to remember that they're individuals to remember. Nobody wants to live on the streets, but addiction, mental illness makes them believe there's nothing else for them to do.

But to live on the streets. They oftentimes feel that they are not worth more than anything else. And it's our responsibility as a community provider and a nonprofit to love them where they are, to work with all of you to make certain that we can have a better tomorrow. But please know that until we understand that this is just a symptom of a bigger problem, we're going to need to continue to have these conversations.

Speaker 6 (52m 1s): That's awesome. Not so awesome. And, and I'll take my 30 seconds just to say a thank you. Thank you for your wisdom. Thank you for your stories. I truly believe that it takes the entire village to take care of this issue. There is no us versus them. And the fact that we have government, quasi-government, however you classify yourself, organizations with community-based organizations starting to have this conversation is a huge step in the right direction.

And I'm hoping that next time you have this conversation, you ask the audience, how many have incorporated this? We see more hands give it to you. All that, that's my challenge to you all. But I, and because homeless services require a spectrum of approach, it is not one approach. I, I have to say when I saw the picture of the police officer, my heart would, cuz that's not approach that I, but I understand the, the reality of that, right? Because of the size of Philadelphia, the different communities. So every type of approach is necessary and valid.

And I think that's where that diversity of services is key. And the last thing I'll say is my mom really wants me to move back home to la So if you got anything, if you got any opening system, I'll be willing to come work for you. And with that being said, I, I think we're good. Right? Thank you all

Speaker 0 (53m 25s): Very much. Thank you.

Speaker 2 (53m 41s): Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website, mpactmobility.org. That's m as in mobility and pact as in agreement dot org. mpactmobility.org.