

Final Interview: Nikole Gomez & Melissa Queliz Nov. 4, 2022

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: It has been reported that homelessness in New York City has reached the highest levels since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Nearly one in every 106 New Yorkers is homeless—that's nearly 70,000 men, women and children. Who is reaching out to help these individuals? With us today are Nikole Gomez and Melissa Queliz with the non-profit organization Services for the Underserved (S:US). Ladies, welcome to the podcast.

MQ: Thanks for having us.

KK: I must, before we start, tell everybody how I met Nikole. It is definitely a New York story. I was on the bus going home. It was crowded but I found a seat. That's when I overheard Nikole speaking to a man, obviously homeless, lying in the back of the bus. She told him to sit up in order for an elderly woman to sit down and began asking him questions, like did he have a place to sleep that night. She was so kind and relentless. She told him she could find shelter and even gave him her card. I was blown away by this act of kindness and I asked her, would you care to speak on our podcast. So again, Nikole, thank you. I'm curious, did he ever get in touch with you?

NG: He got my card and said he would call when he was ready so he hasn't got in touch with me but I have been looking out for him on my route home because I take that route home every day so I've been looking out for him, but sometimes people, they come when they're ready so...

VC: So, Nikole, tell us about your background and why you chose this particular career path.

NG: I'm 33 years old, I identify as an African-American Hispanic female, and I've been involved in case management for a few years. I obtained my Bachelor's last year from Touro College, so prior to that I worked at Fedcap and law offices helping people get social security disability but I wanted to, you know, be more in the work force actually helping people. I feel like it was a calling. And the best way I could help people is get people off the streets.

KK: Now how long have you been with S:US, Services for the Underserved?

NG: Since May, so it's been about six months, and it's my first time in this field. I love it.

VC: What do you actually do as a case manager?

NG: So, as a case manager what I do is provide support for the community, helping them with resources addressing substance or mental disabilities or mental health so that's basically what I do. I go out and talk to the homeless on the street. We try to get them to shelter, you know, and it's different steps. Everybody's a different person but that's what we do. We provide services and resources for the homeless so they can be safe, because everybody should be safe in our city.

KK: Yes, absolutely. Do you have a certain area that is assigned to you to go to these people on the street or are you just out there?

NG: Our organization is really, really big and we usually have people covering different parts of the boroughs but we mainly are, well, I am, in the 125th Street area where there are a lot of homelessness, over here on 125th and Lexington and in this area, we go all the way up Fifth Avenue to First Avenue, we just try to cover the Harlem area, the East side of the Harlem area, that's what we cover right now.

KK: How long has the organization been, when was it started? Do you know?

NG: Forty years ago. (KK: Really) So Services for the Underserved has been here for 40 years but SOS is just brand new and we basically help the homeless, we're out there, we're getting in touch with them. SUS also helps with other services and supports the homeless as well.

VC: So, Melissa, can you tell us, I've looked at your website and you provide a lot of services for the homeless, shelter access, things like that. So, can you tell us a little bit more about what services SUS provides?

MQ: Absolutely. So, the people who come to SUS, they come for a variety of like different services. We serve more than 37,000 individuals and families, and from that group of people that we serve, we provide services for people with disabilities, people in poverty, those that are facing homelessness, anyone who has like mental illness or substance abuse challenges, we have programs that provide services for like women and children who have experienced domestic violence, people living with AIDS, and veterans. So just to come back to your question about when was SUS founded, we've been open since 1978 and we are one of New York City's largest social service and housing organizations. We have about 1,800 in staff like in our agency. (KK: Oh, that's big. VC: wow).

VC: The city shelter system is facing a number of challenges and I'd like to address this to both of you. What do you see as the biggest challenge in terms of the services you're providing?

MQ: You know, I think one of the biggest challenges is ... think what typically comes with outreach, right? Dealing with the challenges of outreach, and maybe clients who don't want to connect with services, maybe they aren't really receptive at that time so I guess similar to the individual that Nikole met on the bus so we just kind of, based on our experience, working with people in the mental health population, it's very common that individuals fear judgement and change or the unknown in a sense, right? So as mental health professionals, we are trained to meet the clients where they are at. And part of meeting them where they are at is taking the one size doesn't fit all approach. So, for example if we see a client during outreach and they don't really want services at that time, they just really ask us for a cup of coffee or something, right? We'll get them that cup of coffee because we look at that as starting to begin building that relationship because the next time, we see that person they may ask us, you know, like, "Hey, do you guys know where I can go to apply for benefits?" And so, from there the connection really increases. I think the challenge is for us, we really want to help others, but then it's also remembering that we have to meet them where they're at and they may have moments when they're not really receptive to like receiving services at that time of initially being connected to us.

KK: And I imagine what Nikole said, you have areas you keep going back to so some of these people become very familiar with you and can feel comfortable enough to talk to you. We're coming in on winter in New York City. If they are willing to accept your help, what facilities do you have available for them to go to?

MQ: Typically, as Nikole mentioned, like for example, with our SOS program, which is Safe Option Support, it's a new initiative that just came up as of April and this is from the Governor, so we have ongoing meetings where we're connecting with like DHS, and different agencies, right, to be able to support them with placement, utilize safe havens and be able to explore different projects, to be able to open up more housing units for us to be able to place more individuals. There are different things that are in place now, different connections that we have and there's also projects that we're now initiating and hopefully within the next year or so we'll have more units to be able to place these clients in. But we also do utilize in SUS, we have different housing programs so we utilize our internal housing programs. We have other sister programs too that we utilize so there's a big resource and connections with a lot of other agencies as well.

VC: Is your work at all affected by the influx of migrants which appear to be further straining the already strained city shelter system?

MQ: So, you know currently, we have about 57, I would say, asylum seekers in our shelter, at SUS, and our fiscal year, with the Department of Homeless Services like their approved budget, of course at that time they didn't factor in these added expenses that have been incurred by providing services to migrant families, and from those services it includes needing warm clothing, toiletries, sometimes language translation services, metro cards and food so as an agency we are helping them as best as we can, but I would just offer like for your listeners, if they would like to help and donate for any of those items they can also reach out to our agency directly.

VC: And where can they do that? Is there a link, a website where they can go?

MQ: Yes, so our website is sus.org but there's also a direct email which is info@sus.org.

VC: Perfect. And let me just also ask you, what is the most rewarding part of your work? From both of you.

MQ: I think for me the most rewarding part, you know, I personally have been in this field for 14 years. I started as a case manager and from there I progressed to more of like a management position and I think the most rewarding part is getting to know the clients, like really understanding their backgrounds, supporting them around these services that they need, connections that they probably missed throughout the years and just kind of keeping in mind, especially those that have been in the system for a really long time, we tend to deal with a lot of the emotions and frustrations, and all those things, but I think the most rewarding part is really kind of starting to work with someone in not such a good place and being able to help them progress like on their goals and really just helping them become a better version of themselves.

KK: You know, I think people in this city when they do see homeless on the street, mostly it's men that I see, very rarely women and children. But you always think, oh, they're druggies or alcoholics. Is that always the case or are they just...things are bad and they're one paycheck away from being able to pay their rent.

MQ: It's so funny that you say that. Because I think that there is that stigma, that most of the homeless are someone who is using drugs or substances. I think Nikole could probably speak to this a little bit more based on her outreach but we have clients who are homeless and are working and probably just don't have enough money to be able to pay their rent, right? We have clients who lived in luxury apartments and it was just like one bad incident that happened and they lost everything, right, where it could have been like a medical issue or their first mental health break, in a sense, right, so it literally is for a variety of different reasons but maybe Nikole could talk a little bit about some of the clients that they've come across in their outreach because I think she actually has a few people on her case load who are working and they have maybe no history of substance abuse or mental health at all.

NG: I actually do have a few clients. I have a client who actually is about to start working with us at SUS as a maintenance worker so I'm so excited for him. He also just received his Section 8 vouchers so, we're going to help him look for an apartment, and you know, this guy, I found him in Marcus Garvey Park sitting on a bench and I approached him, I talked to him a little bit about what was going on with him and he basically told me, he fell on hard times and he had nowhere to go. He had a job but he was sleeping in the park in the night time. So, I said, you know, we can help you out with that. You know if you have a job, you're on your feet, you have no substance, none of that stuff, he just fell on hard times. But right now, he's doing really good, he has an internship at the shelter he's in (VC: Oh, wow) but that's only for six weeks so we tried to find something that could be more permanent so he just got hired at SUS, he's about to start the maintenance position and I'm very proud of him (VC: wonderful). Yeah, so everything's falling in place with him. We have a couple of other

people that have started from having nothing to now, you know, they're getting their vouchers in order to get into shelters and stuff like that, so that's the most rewarding part for me, seeing the client say, "Oh, Miss Gomez, thank you! Thank you for helping me out." That right there makes my whole day and I live for things like that. I love to help people so that's what makes me want to come to work every day and want to continue to work with these clients because that's a gift in itself.

KK: You know, I saw that on the bus and what you're telling us now is not a surprise. You're amazing. I did have another question, though. What is the ratio between men like you're talking about and now you're helping them get the job, to women that are out on the street, with or without children? Do you meet any of these women? It doesn't have to be a statistic.

NG: We have women that have come to us, they needed help, we put them into shelter, we have them working on their personal things that are going on, there is mental health out there but at the same time there's people that just need help.

VC: And how about families? What particular challenges do you face working with families?

NG: At SOS, we usually deal with the street homeless people so mostly they're single individuals but families, when we do get families that need help, we refer them to this place called PATH in the Bronx. They take families, you go in there, you're able to bring your family, we tell them they can go there for services or any other services that they need that we can help them with here, we help them with that also.

MQ: And I'll also add to that, SUS does have shelters that specifically work with children and families. And so, I would say that as of August 2022 in general, in New York City, in the shelter system, there's about 17,680 children and families in the shelters so we have a couple of shelters in SUS that service families and children.

VC: So, are you guys, in the face of all these challenges, are you hopeful for the future?

MQ: Yeah, I would say absolutely. I think that part of being hopeful is being able to focus and progress and motivate possible positive actions. I think we all need support in some kind of way and one of our goals is to really instill that hope for others, and remind them that it's never too late to become the best version of themselves. That's one thing that we really try to keep in mind and keep at heart.

KK: Well, you guys are amazing and I'm so glad that I got on that bus and experienced this and you are all an inspiration. We forget that there are people out there and we could be one of them at any time. (VC Exactly). God forbid if something happens.

VC: Exactly, exactly. I recall, in talking with you guys, I live on the upper east side, it's a pretty good neighborhood. But at one time, which is why I asked you about the families, there was a homeless family, living in like a storefront, an empty storefront, and it was a family, it was the two parents and a couple of small children and they were all sleeping in boxes. It was so sad, and people in the neighborhood kind of adopted them and would bring them food and things and eventually they... I know I saw people that looked like they were from some social services organizations go talking to them and eventually they moved away. But that image really stuck with me for such a long time that you know, that here in this great city that we have there are people who are in these situations. As both of you said, it could be any of us at any time if you fall into dire circumstances so...thank you both for what you do, you and your colleagues and your entire team.

KK: We really appreciate it and you know now, when we do see somebody out in the street, we can at least tell them where to go, where to call.

NG: Thank you. And again, we have a lot of different services, right, so in addition to homeless, we also provide services for veterans, we provide services for New Yorkers who really just need some short-term case management and support around like rental arrears and just other prevention needs. So, there's a lot of services that we do at SUS and it would be great if they could definitely check out our website and just reach out to us if they have any questions. (KK: Absolutely)

VC: Absolutely. Don't forget, if you or someone you know need services, email SUS at info@sus.org. Or call 877-583-5336.

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