FINAL TRANSCRIPT
TRUMP TRASHES THE HOMELESS
Interview took place on 8/11/25

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: President Trump recently signed an executive order that addresses homelessness. Among other things, it promotes elimination of "harm reduction" and "housing first" approaches. It also encourages states to involuntarily commit homeless individuals who are determined to be mentally ill, substance abusers, or unable to care for themselves. Joining us today to look at the impact of this executive order is Deborah Padgett, Professor; Silver School of Social Work, New York University. Welcome, Deborah. Thanks for joining us.

DP: Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

VC: So, Deborah, what exactly are harm reduction and housing first policies and why are they being eliminated?

DP: Okay, well first I'll start with harm reduction because that existed before housing first. It's an approach to addiction in which you don't require absolute sobriety to work with the person. It started in terms of drug, recovery of drug abuse, substance abuse where rather than absolute requiring of being clean and sober, you work with the person and it works, generally speaking.

VC: You work with them to get them clean and sober, that's the idea, right?

DP: But you don't force them. You don't force them to do it. But once they're in a situation of trust, it tends to work much better. So, when housing first began in New York City in 1992, harm reduction was already on the map, not only in drug abuse but also during the AIDS epidemic in terms of safe sex and so forth. So, you minimize the harmful consequences without requiring complete sobriety in not using drugs or alcohol.

VC: And housing first as well.

DP: Yeah, I should say that harm reduction was a natural fit for housing first as one of the primary values in the approach because it really reflects the housing first tenets, philosophy about housing and treatment which is you work with the consumer. They have choice, and you work with them on those choices. What's been so gratifying for me in my research is seeing in real time, with real people, how it works. And that's really my focus. We have plenty of randomized trials, statistics showing how housing first works. I'm very much interested in the human level of what it's like to get housing and also how do you deal with addiction, drinking problems, as well as serious mental illness and that's really a primary focus of housing first is people with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia.

VC: So, the idea is to get them into some kind of housing situation so that they could then go into whatever treatment programs…

DP: Yes. I think what's important about housing first is that the person is guaranteed housing and their behavior does not force them to be evicted. They may be evicted by the landlord but the program stays with them. So, what's really important is not only do you provide them with housing but it's not housing only. Services that housing first provides to me are what really makes the reality of housing come to full fruition because the services help you with medications in case you do have a serious mental illness or help you with the consequences of your family members and so forth. And if addiction or drug use is a problem also to help but not to have these strict requirements to keep your housing.

VC: So why do you think they're being eliminated, these programs, in this executive order?

DP: President Trump, through his various people who represent him has been very clear. He has accepted the message from billionaires who are really after housing first and have spent a great deal of money and time on trying to eliminate it. They feel it's enabling substance abuse. They feel that housing first is rewarding people rather than requiring them to earn their way into housing. And there is no question that in many of these cities, San Francisco in particular, also New York, homelessness is a problem and people are living outdoors. Today, as a matter of fact, I think they're going to start the process of what Trump calls, "no more Mr. nice guy" which is somewhat ironic to me, where they're going to do roundups, clearances.

KK: I see enough homeless on the street, there's no question, especially in this city. So, you just said how they are going to eliminate harm reduction which makes the problem worse and now, is the police going to be the ones to deal with this? Not only in this city but across the board, who's going to deal with this if they eliminate housing first?

DP: Yeah, to some extent I think it's going to be very hard for them and I can tell you one thing. One thing I can be sure of. It's going to cost imminently much more than if you had housing first. And it will last with housing first. Whereas what he's doing, or what he's proposing to do, is round people up, clear out the encampments, and then take them to some undisclosed location and … sound kind of eerily familiar to earlier in our history in kind of barracks. This is a place where people would be forbidden to use drugs and so forth but when you see what he envisions it's nothing but punishment or incarceration. So, they're going to be taken outside of the city limits, forced into treatment. I honestly don't know who or how they're going to do this because we have billions invested in treatment programs and outreach and shelters and a lot of other things that aren't nearly as draconian as what he's saying he's going to enact. For me it's like a nightmare scenario.

KK: It's a nightmare (VC: It is). Does he include, and I'm sure he does, the individuals that are disabled, or mentally… (DP: Oh yeah) how do they figure that out?

DP: Let me give you a couple of statistics that I think puts this a little bit into a clearer picture. Most homeless people are families, in numbers. So, if you're looking at typicality it's usually a young mother with

one or two children. But about 30%, give or take, are single adults with a serious mental illness and also often, substance use. So, in terms of sheer numbers. Now people on the street, you don't see families, I will say that. It's pretty unusual, at least in the United States. But they are doubled up, or they go immediately into shelters so they don't live on the street, of course there is some level of families with children. Of course, where they're put is often a very shabby motel out by the airport or something, but you don't really see the majority of homeless people in these encampments. It's not really representative, let's say. But once they start rounding people up, at least 30% if not more are going to be suffering with a mental illness. A larger percent are probably using drugs and substances. But I always say you can't prove that's not a result of homelessness rather than a cause of homelessness. We've interviewed folks in my research over their life histories and for some of them drugs were involved in their personal case of losing their housing but generally speaking, drugs are so available in this city in NY and around the country that it's kind of hard if you're suffering, living outside, you have to be alert (KK: Oh yeah) every night. We've had people tell us they don't want to take amphetamines but they have to stay awake. Women, to escape sexual assault, men to escape attacks, theft and so forth so sometimes it's almost a coping mechanism to use.

VC: Some people might say that any efforts to get mentally ill people or substance abusers into some kind of treatment could be a good thing. In fact, some governors and mayors, including our Mayor Adams have actually implemented such policies. So, what are your thoughts on that?

DP: Well, even more meaningful to me, because Adams I think sways in different directions is the governor of California (VC: Yes, Newsome, yeah) who has really made a pivot from being much more compassionate about the homeless and so forth but now maybe he's doing it for the vote or whatever reason, he is trying to enact laws forcing people to be involuntarily committed who are adjudicated to have a serious mental illness. This is a legal kind of decision. So, we're seeing quite a change around the country in attitudes, at least in the at the level of our political leadership. I think it's going to be very difficult. I know we can talk further about the idea of involuntary commitment because this is truly one of the most difficult conundrums for people who care about the homeless as well as people who don't is how to help people. But I will generally go back to housing first because my research over the past 20 years has been really focused on that and I've seen it in real time help people overcome not only addictions or dependence but also the worst of their mental illness, the symptoms, to really stabilize. And it's not necessarily any particular treatment as much as I think it's having the security of being indoors and not having this constant threat of being outside. So, I do put a lot of what I feel is proven research showing that people do better when housed.

KK: When we were doing research about this subject, back in I think the 70s, Geraldo Rivera with Willowbrook, was that not the same thing we're talking about today?

DP: Yes. Willowbrook I think really set in motion a lot of interest in really radical change in terms of institutional settings. Following that we had what we can de-institutionalization, you've probably heard that term, but it literally was closing the vast majority of psychiatric hospitals because of abuse in those hospitals using these horrible therapies and this had been going on for decades. And by the 80s, it is true that the idea of saving millions of dollars in closing these very expensive psychiatric hospitals, although New York State kept some open upstate, because the workers' unions were very concerned about the closures. But by and large

much money was saved. However, sadly, it was not really put into community based mental health services where people with a serious mental illness get the help, they need without being virtually incarcerated and even subject to some very dangerous kinds of therapies-insulin, shock, experimental kinds of ways of dealing with this. We've learned a lot more since then. In the 80s certainly included a disproportionate number of people with serious mental illness, still only about 30%. But it was largely the result of Regan and the policies of the Federal government beginning in the 80s to basically stop the building of public housing, to cut back on what were already very successful but also in short supply, rental vouchers, originally called Section 8. Regan said, this should not be part of government business to do this, to cut back dramatically on the availability of rental vouchers. These are vouchers that will pay a private landlord and you will get housing in an apartment and only pay I think no more than 30% of any income that you do have. And public housing was basically frozen in time. In New York City you see nothing that was built past the 70s, and built much earlier than that, the buildings. So, with this kind of relatively sudden ending of some of the best available ways for people to be housed who don't have large incomes it was almost inevitable that people were going to end up on the street. It's like a game of musical chairs. It was an inevitable outcome. There just wasn't enough housing for people with low incomes.

VC: You had mentioned these different services that the city provides for homeless people and a city like New York, we rely very heavily on Federal funding to support these services so what recourse do these individuals have?

DP: New York City doesn't rely that much on Federal funding for homeless services. I just want to give you a statistic that I kind of knew but it blew me away when I saw it. New York City spends close to four billion dollars per year just on homelessness, DHS and so forth. That is the whole annual budget of HUD—for homeless services. About four billion. So, the city spends as much as is allotted to the whole country. And I also want to say that I would guess that no more than 20, 25% of the four billion comes from Federal sources. The vast majority comes from New York State and New York City. That's still a lot of money. The right to shelter, you may or may not know, but it's legally guaranteed in this city, unlike anywhere else in the states, it's an absolute guarantee. So, for that or whatever reason, New York went down the road of, let's build more and more shelters. Every time the rates went up or the numbers went up, more shelters were built or old buildings were redone to be shelters. That's kind of interesting to me, a little bit of irony that housing first started here in New York City in 1992 and then spread from there. It's now in almost every country in western Europe. We're going to have our first conference there this year. But it was kind of a lonely island, in what I call a huge shelter industry, four billion dollars a year going to the many, many hundreds of nonprofits there to help the homeless, a lot of money to private landlords. The monies have been broken down and we see how it's spent. My concern is that it doesn't end homelessness.

KK: Thinking what you're saying, since he's eliminated these two important policies, who's going to enforce this?

DP: That's what gets me so perplexed at times. How do we get off this merry-go-round, so to speak, that is predicated on legally needing to provide shelter, but even allocating some of those four billion dollars a year to housing first programs, and some agencies or programs in the city are pretty close to doing what I call

housing first but not so much, there are different ways you can stay kind of faithful to the model, like harm reduction and so forth but it's really hard to change course when we have 30 years of rapidly expanding funding for shelters. And I am a little concerned that the people that benefit are not only the people who earn incomes, which is very sympathetic, people must work to keep the shelters open, and guarded, provide food, services and so forth. But there are a lot of wealthy interests who benefit from this system as well, private landlords, developers who get incredible tax advantages, promising that low or somewhat lower income families will get some of the units, rarely coming through with that. Sadly, it's a system in the city… I don't want to say that shelters do nothing because the vast majority of our homeless people are in shelters, something like 90,000 people. And on the streets… I'd have to check the numbers but it's probably no more than 5,000 people. So, compare that to California where it's the opposite. Very, very few people in shelters. That's not the route they chose to go. But a lot of people are outside, living outside in Oregon, Washington, and this is where a lot of the impetus to not go the route, some of us hope they won't go the route of shelter industry but there are plenty of conservative voices and some faith based organizations and so forth who would prefer to go to what now you might call incarceration outside of the city and enforced sobriety and so forth. It doesn't take much to predict this isn't going to work.

VC: Yeah, it's only going to increase homelessness, it looks like.

KK: The thing that kills me is that he is quick, quick to eliminate. What's the next step?

DP: And when you look at the alternatives to housing first you can break it down almost any way. They're more expensive because these individuals are going to leave, somehow, they're going to escape these carceral conditions and once they're out they may be put in jail for a night, they may go to an emergency room multiple times, they may have to spend time in a hospital and so forth. These are very expensive ways of being homeless. And again, I go back to what he's proposing is going to cost a lot of money to enforce these camps, internments, and it's going to take personnel and it's going to be a lot like prison.

VC: Yes, it sounds very much like that. So, in this climate of reduced services and opportunities for housing and treatment, what recourse do these individuals have?

DP: That's a very good question. I'll give you the answer here in New York is, the Coalition for the Homeless is very helpful. They have hot lines, and they can really help. The city has a program for free legal advice if you are facing eviction. So why not prevent homelessness, right? That critical moment when a family is facing eviction and near certain homelessness, landlords come with attorneys and they always win. The only problem with that program is that it's been a little slow starting up and I think partly because it's harder to find attorneys to do that kind of work. The Legal Aid Society has been tremendously helpful. So, what do they do? Most of them are in the shelters. Men have to go through the Bellevue Hospital Shelter; women have to go to a shelter in Brooklyn. It's one central intake place, and then families have an intake center in the Bronx. So, once you enter yourself into that system at best, you're what we call up the staircase, where you'll earn the right to get into more and more into independent housing. These are mainly for single adults. Families, as I said, usually get housed but not necessarily in very good conditions, temporary, crowded, none of…it's not like, on the street, oh, that shelter is a good one… no, I don't know of any good city-run shelters.

KK: We've heard for years; I'd rather be on the street than go to a shelter. (VC: Yeah, a lot of folks say that.)

DP: We have an article about that. We actually went out and interviewed people throughout much of Manhattan and that is what they would say. Actually, many of them had already been in a shelter and knew what they had to get away from. And then during COVID that gave us a little bit of hope that all these empty hotels could be converted. They've done that a little bit but basically the city has closed those options even before the Federal FEMA monies ran out and have gone back to these shelters. I think it's in part because they owe these landlords 20-year leases and that kind of thing. We're almost kind of rooted in this model.

VC: Wow. So, you just mentioned a couple of resources that people could go to learn more or to get some help. Are there any others that you think are worthwhile?

DP: Yes. There is an organization called Shout New York at shoutnyc.org and it is run by people who have been homeless and generally people who have a psychiatric disability and they're very good at advocating on behalf and their website is full of incredibly helpful resources for people who are searching for help. I will mention rental vouchers are really the answer in most cases, particularly for families, the research has shown that. And to the city's credit, not only do we have the Federal, hopefully for the time being, Section 8 vouchers but the city also funds FHEPS vouchers which are similar in that they pay the rent for that person. It's pretty open ended. If you have any income they ask for 30% but it really is the way out of homelessness for families is to get a rental voucher. But I just heard last week that the city announced that for the first time in a very long time that they are going to open up applications for city vouchers—600,000 applications (VC/KK Wow) almost overnight. Can you imagine the need… nationally we estimate for every Section 8 voucher, there's one out of five people get it. 80% do not even though they are eligible. So, there's an incredible need. I mean, it's good to have something but 600,000…

VC: Yeah, that's amazing. It's not surprising when you think about it.

DP: I didn't think it would be that much to be honest. I thought that the growth of the FHEPS program would have put a bigger dent. If anything, you look around and you see that buildings are going up everywhere but not affordable housing (VC: No way, no way). I think the vacancy rate for affordable housing right now is under 1%.

VC: That totally makes sense. Do you know, do you have any idea when these cuts and changes in these policies are supposed to take effect?

DP: Well, I can say that Trump issued an executive order. That for any locality to get Federal funds they will have to stipulate, how they demonstrate this I don't know, they'll have to say that they're not using housing first, they are requiring sobriety so it's just kind of flip the script, how that's enforced I don't really know (KK I don't think they do either). No, I don't either. You're right. They're just going to ordain this and then expect people to figure out how to do it but they're very clear that no agency, no program, no local continuum of

care will get Federal funds… housing first is out. You can't see those two words "not allowed." So, if I were head of a program, I'd probably just scrub housing first off, my website and try to keep doing as much as possible under the circumstances but I suspect that given all the support by these very wealthy billionaires to do this that they're going to be monitoring… they work with state legislatures, for example. I fear there's going to be enough enforcement to make it very difficult.

VC: And again, to your knowledge, you don't know when they're supposed to take effect, these changes?

DP: To my knowledge it wasn't mentioned in the executive order. And I just want to add that the supreme court's already given him free reign per their decision last June, the Grants Pass case much to our disappointment. The supreme court ruled that localities can put people in jail for homelessness, basically. Before that they had to show that there was a shelter bed and the person refused it but now it's for any reason they can go into these encampments and give them citations, put them in jail.

KK: Which is also, in the end, going to be very expensive.

DP: Yes, absolutely. That's the one constant thread you pull through all this, and I'm glad you said that, everything that's proposed other than housing first is more expensive almost to the point of being mind-boggling. We're already spending four billion a year if you have to pay for incarceration facilities. There are companies, by the way, that these billionaires are affiliated with that do run private prison services, new technology, it's called Palantir Technologies, that's one of the companies. So, there are some profits to be made by these changes but I honestly don't know, I think they're just going to put it out there and expect the organizations to prove they're doing it before the money is allocated. I've done enough research and talking to people over the years to see that when you see how they can change for the better and you know that it can happen and their symptoms really get less intrusive sometimes as they grow older, but many people told us their stories of how they became clean and sober and it wasn't a program, it was just kind of this existential decision of, I want to live, and I am going to take my recovery in my own hands. To see it's possible makes it even harder to take this, to see it personified in individuals. Not everybody, it's 80-90% success rate for housing first.

VC: Well, that still sounds like a pretty good rate.

DP: You got my punch line. I was going to say, I'm in the world of human behavior, social work and services… I can't think of anything else that comes in at 90%. It's even more disheartening to see something that works and is personified in helping people having better lives and then being taken away.

VC: That is absolutely the case. Deborah, this has been an amazing, enlightening conversation. Thank you so much.

DP: I'm proud to be here and thank you for inviting me.

VC: The pleasure is ours.

END