

It Takes a Village to Bring Us Home

SEARCH Homeless Services CEO Alexis Loving and local community efforts have played a pivotal role in reducing Houston's homeless population by an impressive 61% since 2011.



By Melissa Orsak

Homelessness is a devastating issue that profoundly impacts countless individuals and families across our nation, leaving deep scars on those caught in its unyielding grip. The harsh realities of living without stable shelter create not only physical vulnerabilities but also emotional and psychological challenges that can be overwhelming. As we endeavor to cultivate a more compassionate and equitable society, it is crucial to acknowledge the transformative power of collaboration. The age-old proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," symbolizes the importance of community and collective responsibility in nurturing and supporting each other. This wisdom underlines that seeking help and offering assistance are not merely acts of kindness but essential components of fostering resilience in the face of adversity.

Alexis Loving, the President and CEO of SEARCH Homeless Services, and her dedicated team embody these principles by uniting the Houston community to provide essential resources and compassionate support to individuals and families facing homelessness. Their innovative programs and outreach initiatives provide a lifeline for those in need, helping them not only to navigate the challenges of homelessness but also to reclaim their dignity and rebuild their lives. Through collaboration and empathy, Alexis and her team strive to create lasting changes, transforming lives and fostering hope within the community.

Loving, a first-generation college student, dreamed of attending college in the bustling metropolis of New York at New York University. Her aspirations were driven by what she wanted

to study and where she longed to be. After a semester of college, she realized that her chosen field of study held greater significance than her location, prompting her to transfer to Northeastern University, where she pursued a degree in Criminal Justice and Human Services, now known as Social Work.



Loving's journey through college was not without obstacles. She found herself struggling with the tragic loss of two family members, which caused delays in securing summer internships. Despite this tremendous hardship, Loving persevered, often neglecting her well-being as she soldiered on. Loving shared, "I kept going like nothing was happening, and then I just crashed. I couldn't

go on. I went to the university counseling center. If it wasn't for them, sorority sisters, friends, and... everything, I don't know what would have happened. It was a saving grace. I always think back to how hard it was to ask for help, to receive help, and how thankful I was that it was there.

I wanted to be someone like that. That is what encouraged me to pick up those courses and go into the counseling field. To [continue] in the field of human services and in the field of helping others."

Loving's late internship placement turned into a "happy accident" for her future career. She





city. I applied everywhere for jobs. I didn't have a place to live. SEARCH [Homeless Services] was the only place that would even interview me. I feel so blessed because now, knowing the landscape and knowing all the organizations, there is not a place I would have otherwise chosen. I came here as a case manager working directly with our clients and housing and have been here ever since, 14 years ago. It all happened for a reason."

SEARCH is one of the largest homeless service organizations in Houston. Their mission

solidified a placement at the St. Francis House in Boston, working in their Moving Ahead Program. Loving felt connected with individuals coming out of incarceration and helping them reestablish their lives. Loving shared, "It was a 12-week program. I wanted to stay there and work full-time. The interview ended, and my graduation came, and it was time to leave Boston. I wasn't ready to stop the work. That was a decision point for me, that I needed to keep working in Homeless Services. So, I kept looking for this work."

Upon graduation, Loving found herself at a crossroads and "essentially threw darts on a board" to determine where to go next. Taking a leap of faith, her adventure continued in unfamiliar territory as her "dart" landed deep in the heart of Houston, Texas. Loving commented, "I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anything about the



statement states, "SEARCH is dedicated to providing hope, creating opportunity, and transforming lives for thousands of men, women, and children experiencing homelessness in our community. We bring this mission to life every

day by helping our clients obtain permanent housing, increase their income, improve their health, develop their children, and regain their stability and self-sufficiency."

SEARCH offers a multitude of programs. One such program, House of Tiny Treasures (HTT), is one of Loving's favorites. HTT is a comprehensive early childhood education school serving 64 children aged 21 months to pre-kindergarten. This program is geared toward its commitment to breaking the cycle of homelessness and poverty and prepares children to enter the public school system successfully. Loving said, "We know that kids who fall behind before they even get into kindergarten are going to be labeled and stay behind. They're more likely to drop out and fall behind their peers. We're trying to break that cycle."

As director of programs, Loving decided to test the program and teach her own children invaluable lessons by enrolling them in HTT. Despite the costly fee for those who are not homeless, she wholeheartedly believed in the program's success and thought it was well worth the cost. She was enlightened by the program's changes in her children, instilling lifelong lessons in her children's lives. Observers often note her children's exceptional empathy and compassion, a testament to the program's success. Through her children's enrollment, Loving gained valuable insights about the program that helped her further enhance the HTT offerings and goals.

SEARCH not only positively transforms lives, but it also generates substantial cost savings for the city of Houston. Evidencing its success, Houston leads the nation with a remarkable 90-95% overall success rate in addressing homelessness. This figure encompasses retaining housing for a homeless individual or family for at least one year, coupled with growth in various areas such as increased income, enhanced quality of life, improved family relations, as well as better physical and mental health and employment. Surprisingly, housing an individual for a year costs less than \$17,000, representing significant savings compared to the expenses incurred when

someone living on the streets relies on emergency services, which often amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars. The positive impact of SEARCH is evident in the case of a gentleman nicknamed a "Frequent Flier" for his numerous emergency calls. With the assistance of SEARCH, his annual emergency calls were dramatically reduced from over 300 to just one call.

Loving shared, "Houston is leading the way, showing others how to end homelessness. Since 2011, we've reduced the homeless population by over 61%! These results are higher than the rest of the nation. One of the most important things, and this is what has made Houston's homeless system so successful, is the power and importance of working together."

While employed at SEARCH and expecting her second child, Loving earned her MBA in Executive Leadership at the University of Houston. The program proved to be an excellent fit, offering an exceptional experience by connecting industry professionals with professors and students.

While pursuing her education, Loving encountered a transformative concept from a professor that left a lasting impression. The professor stressed the significance of strengthening existing non-profit organizations rather than establishing new ones, citing the limited resources available and the potential for unnecessary competition. Emphasizing the power of collaboration, the professor advocated for pooling resources to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

Inspired by this wisdom, Loving echoed, "If you have a good idea, have something you want to do, or if there is something you care about, look for someone out there who is trying to do that as well and try to work with them. There is always more power in that. There are a lot of people trying to do good things in our communities. We are more powerful when we work together." Fostering a culture of collaboration, SEARCH thrives on the support it receives from businesses and individuals.

Loving has this advice for those wanting to

get involved in an organization, “Talk to the organization and find out what could be helpful or take time to really understand the issue and what is at the root of it. Figure out how you can really be useful.”

We all drive by homeless people on street corners and wonder how we can help. While every city has different laws and regulations, SEARCH encourages donors to work through agencies and to approach direct outreach cautiously.

Loving's unwavering commitment and relentless work ethic have rightfully earned her the prestigious Houston Business Journal's (HBJ's) 40 Under 40 Class of 2023 Award. This accolade reflects not only personal success but also sends an inspiring message that age should never hinder our ability to contribute meaningfully to our community.

Loving also emphasizes that income and resources should not diminish our capacity to help. She serves as a poignant reminder that every individual has the power to effect change, particularly when we come together in solidarity. A community's vitality is profoundly influenced by its collective support for its most vulnerable members. SEARCH, with its unwavering dedication, is striving to uplift its community by eliminating or further reducing homelessness. Loving hopes that all will extend their support to SEARCH as they continue their mission of rescuing those who have lost hope.

EXAMPLES OF HOW SEARCH ENCOURAGES INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS TO SERVE THE HOMELESS IN THEIR COMMUNITY INCLUDE:



-Make hygiene packs. At home or with a group, fill clear plastic bags with new white tube socks, granola bars, cans of tuna or shelf-stable food, crackers, water bottles, and mosquito repellent. Drop off completed bags to SEARCH and their outreach teams for distribution. (Keeping bottles of water in your car is a thoughtful way to serve people on the street as you drive by.)

-Attend events that raise awareness and funds. SEARCH hosts an annual Luncheon and an annual Picnic. These fun events provide new experiences for donors while supporting a great cause.

-Contribute to volunteer needs online. Find out what SEARCH or other organizations are looking for and sign up yourself or a group.

-Donate time or money. Small donations can make a big difference. It's best to donate money directly to homeless organizations rather than to individuals on the street.

A large advertisement for Avondale House. The top half features a colorful mural with a large flower and abstract shapes. Two people are sitting in front of the mural: a man on the left and a woman on the right. The Avondale House logo, consisting of a stylized 'ah' with a house roof over the 'a', is centered over the mural. Below the logo, text reads: "Avondale House is community where individuals with autism are welcomed and accepted for exactly who they are." and "With a private, year-round day school, adult day program, residential program and employment services, we provide those with moderate to severe autism the resources, education and training to develop to their fullest potential." The bottom half of the ad shows a group of people, including a man, a woman, and a young boy, sitting around a table and looking at a book. A QR code is located in the bottom right corner of the ad.

Avondale House

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With a private, year-round day school, adult day program, residential program and employment services, we provide those with moderate to severe autism the resources, education and training to develop to their fullest potential.

To enroll your loved one in one of our programs or to learn more about how you can get involved with our Board or committees, please email us at info@avondalehouse.org

Learn more at avondalehouse.org | 713-993-9544 | info@avondalehouse.org

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