

Disaster on the Street

By Paul Johnson, Colorado Mennonite Disaster Services (MDS) Executive Board

Having worked with MDS for almost two decades, I thought I knew disasters pretty well. They were usually muddy, moldy muck if it was a flood. They were usually splintered wood and tattered pieces of someone's life scattered across fields if it was a tornado or hurricane. It was the stench of burned wood and blackened possessions as wildfires rage across our country.

But what about this new disaster? It's there in the sunken eyes of a hungry young woman enrolled in college but without enough money for rent, the slow limp of a senior citizen pushing an overflowing shopping cart, the dirty bed roll of a twenty something that can't get a minimum wage job because his car broke down. It's the disaster happening in cities that have forgotten compassion. It starts with good people who got so comfortable in their cozy lives that they forget the unseen stream of people traveling day and night, down back alleys looking for a place to rest.

On the corner of 38th and Walnut in the dusty warehouse district of inner city of Denver, Colorado sits an overgrown vacant lot. What could be done here, how to address the everyday disaster of homelessness, the daily emergency of no roof over your head-not by choice but by circumstance? A 2016 study of affordable housing in the Denver metro area found a shortage of 21,000 houses. Ten thousand people in Denver are homeless on a typical night, day in, day out. A disaster. Oh, by the way, 71% of homeless people have jobs. Almost 50% work 40 hours a week. The number of homeless children has doubled in the last decade. Twenty three percent of homeless are veterans. Talk to them. Walk the streets with them for a day. Not all homeless are lazy slackers. It's like this in most cities in the United States. This slow motion disaster challenges Mennonite Disaster Services core mission of "Responding, Rebuilding, Restoring". Where do we start with a disaster of this size?

A small group of people began meeting 48 months ago to practice the discipline of hope for the homeless. They started building tiny homes with materials recycled and repurposed. They tried out the idea of making sustainable, small footprint, cost efficient homes. They partnered with Blessed Community Mennonite Church, Interfaith Alliance, and Homeless Out Loud to think about how the dream of ending homelessness might start. What could be done if enough people showed compassion for those living on the street? In January, 2017 they came to the Colorado MDS annual planning meeting. The request was simple. Out of three disaster projects we could respond to this year, would you bring compassion and volunteers to build 11 tiny homes and a bath house- a village for homeless on a vacant lot? There was a long moment of silence. No one had ever asked MDS this question. Our Region 3 representatives urged us to think outside the box. So it began.

In April, we met to expand the partnership. A new idea came. Everence Stewardship solutions offered to work with MDS and Beloved Community. An Everence Chapter grant was given to the partnership. Then a Go Fund me site was set up. An architect volunteered time, and miraculously, a general contractor walked the 11 tiny home plans through building department, volunteering three full time staff, including a site superintendent. Twelve residents volunteered to work with MDS to build their own homes on the vacant lot. May 20th was our first of 10 MDS build days. Over 100 people came to

volunteer that first day, four Mennonite churches participated. By all accounts, there was enough joy and hope for everyone, and not a single injury or harsh word. Everence hired a street taco truck to feed everyone and MDS lead the volunteer coordination, framing coordination and site safety. Five other partners helped make this vacant lot dream come true. We didn't build houses, we built community.

God is still at work in this world. If you have any doubts-follow Jesus, go to the margins of society. Go where the homeless sleep, and ask them what their greatest dream is....it's a humble one. "A simple roof to keep the rain out and the snow off me," they will say. "Then, I can start putting my life back together. I don't need your sympathy; I just need a hammer and a few nails, and maybe a partner with enough compassion to show me how to do it. Just a little dignity and I'll take care of the rest."