# Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and Homeless Shelter’s Responses: Roof Above Interview with Room in the Inn Manager and Community Engagement Manager Ashley Brown.

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Interviewee: Ashley Brown Room in the Inn Manager and Community Engagement Manager for Roof Above, Charlotte North Carolina

Interviewer: Matthew Beaver

Date: November 11, 2020

Duration: 28:14

Matthew Beaver: That would be no problem (in response to Ashely Brown stating there may be some noise pollution from her end of the online call.) May I ask is it Ms. or Mrs. Brown?

Ashley Brown: Ms., Ms. is fine.

MB: Ok, well Ms. Brown thank you for taking the time for this interview, well this afternoon, how are you doing?

AB: Good! Thank you, how are you?

MB: Ok, well before we officially begin the interview may I ask if I do have your permission to record this for—this conversation for a yes, analytical historical context in the future?

AB: Yes, that’s fine.

MB: Ok, I’m going to move on to the first question then. May I ask what the overall mission or the overall vision of Roof Above of Charlotte, North Carolina is?

AB: Yes, so our mission is to end homelessness, we bring the community together to do this so we like to partner with a lot of different homeless agencies that are here in Charlotte To accomplish this mission. We also have volunteers we also make opportunities for donations and then we also go out into the community to educate, so that’s another way of getting the community involved. So, we like to go talk to different churches, schools, business groups just to make sure they understand what is homelessness and just different causes and effects of homelessness.

MB: Ok, may I ask how you got personally involved with roof above?

AB: Yes, yes. So, I actually have a background in teaching so I started off teaching refugees English and job skills. So, I kind of wanted to stay somewhat in that area. So, I applied to an Americore program and in Americore they have it’s called an Americore Vista and it’s a program throughout the U.S. where they place individuals in different non-profits that are helping with homelessness or food insecurity. So, I was actually placed here at the time it was Urban Ministry’s Center where are current name is Roof Above. So, I was placed here as the education’s specialist. Back in about 2015.

MB: OK, may I ask? Can you discuss any—how has roof above of Charlotte potentially prepared themselves for the pandemic and what type of practice are you doing there to keep it from spreading?

AB: Yeah. So, we actually just went through a pretty big renovation at our Trion campus, our Men’s Shelter, so we put up a lot of barriers between the different bedding so it’s now put into a lot of different pods. So, some pods it’s one man per pods and sometimes it’s two. So, that helps to kind of spread everyone out and make sure that there is barriers between each person. Cause at first our states fellow campuses as well was very open and so even pre-Covid we decided that, that was kind of the way that we wanted to go was be a little bit more private. So, that worked very well once the pandemic actually hit. We also put a lot of barriers up at our different campuses for example we have a day service center. Where we make sure that there is barriers between the person that’s providing the service and the person that’s receiving. So, it’s a kind of like a clear vapor area. Also, we require that everyone where a mask when they enter in the building and also appropriately distance between each other as they’re going throughout the building.

MB: Ok, besides the social distance, the masks and the barriers, have there been any changes to day-to-day activities, you mentioned a day center. How--  
  
AB: Yes, actually at our day center we—we’re down to just staff that are operating the services we’re. Primarily we were operated mostly by volunteers but once the pandemic hit just listening to their safety concerns we, we had to kind of scale back a bit and kind of rethink how to safely provide services. So, it’s mostly staff running services currently, we also reduced our hours. So, we now operate from 8:30am to 1:00pm instead of 4:00pm. So, we did that because one since it is mostly staff operating the staff does the basic services during the first part of the day and the latter apart they would do their normal duties. So, that’s a big change, also when it comes to preparing and delivering meals that’s very different. Before we had large soup kitchens where everyone could sit together and partake in a meal but now we are mostly doing to-go bags in all of our locations and the Men’s Shelter they do still provide sit down dinners but it’s less people at a table. So, there are various differences between pre and current with the pandemic.  
  
MB: With these differences can I ask, what are some of the—can I get a bit more of an introspective in possibly the challenges in these differences how they effected the Roof Above such as you mentioned staff and reducing hours?

AB: Yeah, it’s there’s lots of challenges when it comes to just staff kind of spreading their time. We’ve kind of had to adjust and how to get our job done in the most efficient and effective ways possible but also still provide all the services that we can possibly provide. We did have to reduce some services that kind of included outside partners. For example, we used to have a dental clinic that was mostly--actually all volunteer run. So, we currently are not we’re not running the dental clinic currently. Also, some of our recreational activities such as the art studio and our garden which we would have services through those two locations we had to reduce that as well. But when it comes to most of the basic services that most of our homeless population needs on a daily basis like showers, laundry, getting their mail, getting counseling we still operate that every day.

MB: Ok, talking about those services I understand that you are the Room in the Inn Manager and you organize a nightly winter shelter through churches and other organizations. How has Covid effected this because I do know it did start late to early last year and this year so…

AB: Yeah that was greatly affected we-- So, Room in the Inn actually normally operates from December 1st to March 31st, however, towards the begging of march of this year that’s kind of when we got news of the pandemic. So, early March we had to quickly shutdown the program actually. Because it is a totally volunteer run program we use volunteers from different churches, schools, and these volunteers they take in our homeless neighbor’s overnight transport them to their facilities provide meals, a recreational activity sometimes, a place to sleep, food in the morning and then bring them back. So, it’s a very involved program it’s very close interaction, especially with the transportation and so we kind of had to make the decision to close that service at—once we once the pandemic hit. Definitely because of the safety reasons. So as soon as that happened we had to kind of rethink how do we provide shelter services. So, we had to kind of think through sheltering through the Men’s Shelter at Trion, opening up different motel options, opening up a dorm option. So, we really had to think outside of the box when it came to closing down Room in the Inn.

MB: Alright, alongside the Room in the Inn manager you are also the Community Engagement Manager. May I ask how that has also changed?

AB: Yes, so as a community engagement manager it’s mostly providing educational services to our community also just letting people know what different ways they can get involved because that has changed a lot recently. Getting involved may look like putting together a welcome home kit but doing it from home and ordering it on amazon for it to get delivered to the home. So, it’s really just rethinking how to provide services from afar. But our volunteers they’ve been very willing to and very adaptable with this whole process and it’s just been very, very helpful of how much involvement they’ve been lately.

MB: Ok, (Clears throat) Excuse me, I also understand that Roof Above is also fairly recent and it’s a kind of a collaborative merger of the Urban Ministry’s Center and the Men’s Shelter of Charlotte may I ask how this merger potentially happened, or maybe how this merger has helped assist in handling this current pandemic?

AB: Yeah, so we merged last year our CEO Liz Clasen-Kelly, she originally worked with Urban Ministry Center she was over our outreach services and then later she moved over to Men’s Shelter of Charlotte as their CEO. So, we have a lot of coworkers that have been at both campuses we have very similar styles and very similar thoughts. So, it was kind of a very natural merger it made sense because we already work together and in many different facets. So, once the pandemic hit it actual was quite helpful to have us be together because it really opened different opportunities when it comes to different sheltering options. The motels opened up after the merger, also with the dorms, also we acquired an apartment complex, Hill rock Estates, and I believe that was definitely due to all of the different partners from both organizations coming to the table together.

MB: Talking a bit more about those groups and coming together. Earlier you mentioned also believe in talking about the mission and overall vision of Roof Above you mentioned multiple groups and churches kind of like an interconnected community working together. May I ask for a little bit more of an introspective into that and how it might have been effected by Covid.

AB: Yes, so when it comes to different groups working together I would say we have—so Hill Rock Estates is actually an apartment complex of about 340 different units that is definitely community effort that you know we were able to borrow that and these apartment units would be at different income rates. So, someone who may have an AMI of 30% they would be able to acquire an apartment same as someone who does not make as much money and so it—yeah, we just have multiple partnerships that help acquire these different sheltering options.

MB: Ok, May I ask also within Charlotte’s Roof Above what type of programs you guys have their to help aid homeless, you mentioned counseling at some point how did these change at least the programs that aid homeless individuals?

AB: Yeah, so at our day center, we it actually hasn’t changed too much when it comes to the number of shower, or laundry slots, we’ve been able to offer. Thankfully that has been fairly consistent except for the hours, we usually were able to extend to 4:00pm which that does play a little bit of based on how many people we could serve but we also have counseling services like we assist people with getting their I.D. or if they need a birth certificate. Those are things we can help with we also have different housing assistance programs. So, we have our Moore Place which is a permanent supportive housing and also Scatter Site which is also permanent supportive housing. Those two facilities have not changed so we’re able to still get people housed through those—both of those programs and then also our two shelters the one on Trion that has been fairly consistent it’s just kind of the flow of traffic may have changed a little and also the big areas that I’ve mentioned earlier and then with our states filled campus that is actually under renovation currently. So, we plan to open a portion of that opened on December 1st and that’s gonna be our new overflow winter shelter. Due to Room in the Inn closing. So, we’ll be able to accommodate 140 men at that location on December 1st.

MB: Alright, speaking about numbers such as you mentioned the 140 men during my research I noticed that Charlotte and Mecklenburg County has a fairly large homeless population within North Carolina. May I ask how were the challenges with handling such a large population of about almost 3,000 within the city and the county.

AB: Yeah, So the numbers actually fluctuate that number the 3,000 number that actually is down currently. So, as of June 1st—well actually there is many, many outlets that give different numbers. The first question is how are they counting those numbers someone might have one definition of homelessness versus another outlet so just kind of seeing where they’re pulling those numbers from. But we pull it from our Mecklenburg county which is 2,782 as of July 31st,. So, numbers are a little bit down however we do have the challenge of upcoming evictions that may have happen due to Covid because of Covid we’ve—there have been various protections in place when it comes to someone staying in an apartment and not being able to pay their rent they haven’t been able to—they’re not able to be evicted due to that protection but coming December those could relax so there is a fear that is a possibility of an increase in homelessness due to those possible evictions.

MB: May I get a bit more insight in the eviction protections because I have interviewed homeless shelters about this. I’ve interviewed, what was it? I believe Homeward Bound in Asheville North Carolina and they did mention that a lot western North Carolina area they’ve been getting multiple calls speaking to them about having help in terms of paying rent and evictions and stuff like that from families. This increased maybe a little bit more or what are you guys doing to combat it?

AB: Yeah, we do receive those requests that is some funding that we are able to provide. That is also through crisis assistance they do also help those who are currently in an apartment and they cannot provide their rent payments so yes those are different services that we offer through our counseling department.

MB: Ok, So, this kind of ties also into the homeless population you said does fluctuates. So, you cannot really predict where the numbers are gonna be in the next few months?

AB: Unfortunately, to have a hard number would be hard however, we are working to increase our capacity of how many people we can shelter during the winter. We should be adding some additional beds at our Trion campus I believe about 40 beds at that campus also the 120—I’m sorry the 130 beds I’ve mentioned from the Statesville overflow. That will be an increase in shelter and we’ll still be keeping our dorms open during that time as well. We’re hoping to limit the amount of people that are on the streets however we do also know that some of our population that is a choice for some people to stay in a camping environment. But we will attempt to get as many people shelter as possible.

MB: you mentioned a camping environment is that correcting?

AB: Yes.

MB: Just now.

AB: Yes.

MB: I did find multiple sources referring to these almost large from—what the news stories I read and saw almost like large tent encampments within Charlotte North Carolina and also, I do believe there was a request made possibly by Roof Above asking for tents and other things to hand to these homeless individuals. May I ask for maybe a bit more inside look into these tenting situations?

AB: Yes, so once Covid hit a lot of people, you know they didn’t really have too many options of where to go. With Room in the Inn closing that did have a lot of people kind of scrambling for shelter. So, you know at that time it was a very big decision of you know how—what is the best way to still keep people safe, still keep people distanced from each other, and one of the options because it was warmer weather at that time was to send out a request for tents and sleeping bags and at that time is also right outside of our facility at our day service center. It is a pretty large encampment we’ve always had people who went to different encampments it’s just a lot more visible now because they’re literally right on. It’s on main street versus hidden away in woods or behind railroad tracks because our—the police and different county officials they’re not going to remove these encampments that is actually an order not to break down these encampments. So, we support our neighbors to encampment there and that’s the best way that we could provide services by asking our community to donate to this area.

MB: May I ask do you interact with these encampments at all with Roof Above I mean that is.

AB: Yes.

MB: Do they go out and give them supplies?

AB: Yes, so the encampments they don’t belong to Roof Above however because of their proximity to our Day Service Center we do have our social workers that go out and interact with all of the individuals that are staying in that area. We help with supplies we partner with some volunteers that also provide supplies and food and then also trying to see where—what stat—where they are in their search for housing so they do provide case management more in an outreach setting.

MB: Alright, how are donations doing cause you did mention the tent encampments and I also mentioned—we also discussed the population of the homeless individual population that is of Charlotte and mecklebur--Mecklenburg county. Sorry about that. How are donations and community outreach doing right now like community outreach into Roof Above?

AB: So, currently our requests are mostly for our winter shelter because that will be starting on December 1st. So, some of the things that we’ve been asking for is new blankets, and pillows and different toiletries for the men that’ll be staying nightly. Also, just making sure we have lunch provided every day so our church groups from Room in the Inn have signed up to provide daily lunches and daily snacks. Also water is something that’s always needed so we’re always having requests out for that. For our other campuses, most of our donations are donation requests are for lunches. Everything else that all the other food items they’re contracted.

MB: Contracted, such as grocery stores or restaurants or--

AB: No, just through different food companies but not restaurants.

MB: Ok, how have they been with supporting this have they’ve been—have you guys been adequality supplied?

AB: Yes, this our Room in the Inn churches have been really, really just waiting to see what they can do to contribute for the winter shelter and so it’s actually been a pretty easy ask. As soon as that went out last week we started receiving donations the following day. Our signups are pretty full for December already and so we’re now looking towards January to start looking for meals for that month.

MB: Ok, that’s good, that’s good May I ask how this pandemic currently has affected you or maybe how it has effected well how you feel and all that?

AB: Yeah, it’s—it has been a challenge being that Room in the Inn has been suspended the way that we are used to seeing it. It’s kind of had me rethinking my job a little bit. So, now instead of operating all of these different church sites I’m now trying to refigure how winter sheltering would operate through the shelter so it’s a very big change in the position. It’s also just it’s been a little overwhelming but at the same time it’s very rewarding because it’s good to know that we have a lot of community partners and a lot of good coworkers that have been very flexible with all of the change.

MB: Ok, is there anything you would like to discuss or mention, personally any ideas or feeling, thoughts anything at all that might be relevant to this interview.

AB: Just very thankful of how everyone has adapted to all of this change. I know it’s been difficult on our neighbors as well. You know, there’s been a lot of change for them change in their routine change in how services are offered. It seems as though Covid has made everything virtual, however, a lot of our neighbors don’t have a lot of virtual access. So, they’ve had to learn—relearn how to get simple things done. Thankfully our counseling team they’re doing the best that they can to make sure that doctor appointments are still being you know—doctors’ appointments are still being made making sure our nurse she still’s doing her virtual visits with our neighbors. So, it’s just a new way of doing things and everybody has been incredibly flexible to get things done.

MB: Ok, well you did mention something just right now. You mentioned virtual meetings with a nurse giving virtual meetings. May I ask a little bit more about that?

AB: Yes, so we have a nurse that comes on side of our day service center two days a week and she also goes to our Trion Campus two days a week. Pre-Covid what our neighbor--our homeless neighbors would do is just come to our counseling center. They can get a bus pass to go to their doctor, however, now with Covid that’s been limited quite a bit in person visits. So, instead our nurse she sets up virtual visits for our neighbors to at least get that first appointment so they can kind of you now just get around all of the different barriers of getting back in form in you know not missing an appointment.

MB: Ok, that’s good to know, that’s good to know. Let’s see may I get the address and phone number or any way to contact Roof Above or any associated groups or communities or organizations for donating or volunteering if anyone is interested.

AB: Yeah, so the best way to contact the physical address for our Day Service Center is 945 North College Street, Charlotte, North Carolina 28208 and if you would like to contact me about any questions or if you would like education on just ways to get involved my name is Ashely Brown and my e-mail is: [Aabrown@roofabove.org](mailto:Aabrown@roofabove.org)

MB: Ok, just to double check is there anything else you wanna discuss or any questions or anything like that?

AB: I think that’s all. Thank you so much.

MB: Ok, thank you for the interview thank you for taking the time and I hope you all the best current handling current winter seasons coming up and handling Covid with the homeless population.

AB: Thank you so much have a good day.

MB: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.