# Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and Homeless Shelter’s Responses: Homeward Bound and Ahope Day Center of Asheville NC, Interview with Intake Case Manager Brian Sarzynski.

Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and Homeless Shelters Response: Homeward Bound and Ahope Day Center Asheville NC.

Interviewee: Brian Sarzynski

Interviewer: Matthew Beaver

Date: October 5, 2020

Duration: 52:04

[Sound of electrical static interference heard throughout recorded interview]

Brian Sarzynski: Well you’ve got my time right now.

Matthew Beaver: Ok, thank you taking this time for this interview. May I ask how you’re doing today?

BS: I’ve been doing pretty good. Are you on a speaker phone right now?

MB: Yes, I ‘am so sorry. It’s for the recording device.

BS: Ah, ok. Well I’m going to put you on speaker to see if I can hear you any better. Because it is a little garbled right now, hang on please.

[Sounds of Brian Sarzynski adjusting phone to allow for a speaker conversation]

Ok can you hear me?

MB: Yes, I can. Can you hear me?

BS: Yes, that actually sounds a little bit better.

MB: Ok, let’s see here. This is Matthew Beaver and this recording is taking place on October 5th 2020 at 2:30 P.M. via speaker phone and recorder. I’ am conversing with mister Brian [pause]—

BS: Sarzynski.

MB: Ok, thank you. The Intake Case Manager at the Ahope Day Center in Asheville, North Carolina, is that correct?

BS: That is correct. In association with Homeward Bound.

MB: Ok, before we begin—before we begin may I ask if I have your permission to record this conversation so that it may be used in an analytical historical context in the future?

BS: Absolutely! you may record.

MB: OK. May I ask what the overall mission of Homeward Bound and or the Ahope Day Center in Asheville, North Carolina is or the overall vision that either of these have had?

BS: Sure. The vision of Homeward Bound is to help people who are experiencing homeless find housing. We are a housing first organization. Now housing first is a philosophy of dealing with the crisis of homelessness. The housing first model is based on the concept that the first—that first of all that housing is a human right. That everyone deserves housing regardless of their status, regardless of what ever is happening in their life. The housing first model basically the philosophy behind it is that we must first house people and then we can address underlying issues. Such as mental health concerns, substance use disorder, and any other thing that might be going on in that person’s life. It’s easier to get sober if you have a roof over your head. It’s hard to get sober when you’re living in the woods. And so, we do not put barriers between our clients and housing. So, that essentially is the mission of Homeward Bound. It’s very difficult given the fact that there is very little affordable housing in Asheville and we’re finding that we’re running out of affordable housing in Western North Carolina as a whole. The housing stock is diminishing, property values are going up, rents are sky high, and there is very little section 8 housing. This is one of the most gentrified cities in the United States of American and we’re finding that it’s just not much in terms of affordable housing. So, overall that’s the mission of Homeward Bound but in the meantime, we also provide services for those who are currently experiencing homelessness and that’s where the Ahope Day Center comes in. This is what we call a—a day shelter we are not an overnight shelter. We are open from eight until noon Monday through Friday and that’s really a confession to the Covid virus. Prior to Covid we operated from eight until three-thirty Monday through Friday. But Because of social distancing we’ve had to reduce those hours. And it’s been proven to be very difficult we’re in a building that is about thirty-five years old and pre Covid virus we may have at any given time seventy-five people in this building. We might see a hundred and seventy-five to two-hundred pass through our doors at any given day and now we’re limited to having five or six people in the building at once. So, we’re trying to do a lot of our services through windows, and minimize these people time in the building and it’s quite difficult. But the day shelter provides essential services, we can provide our clients with showers, hygiene materials such as shampoos and soaps, deodorant things like that, towels, wash cloths, we also provide a telephone for them. They can also use our address as their mailing address that’s one of the most one – it’s one of the biggest challenges folks experiencing homelessness face is the lack of identification the lack of an address all these things that you would need for example to try to get a job, to try to get housing. So, those are some of the services that we do provide. We provide [pause] a little bit of case management here in terms of we do an intake process which is what I do along with my colleague Sam. Where we’re short of the first step for that housing process for Homeward Bound. So, when you’re new to homelessness or if you’re just new to Asheville and you’re experiencing homelessness and you’ve been experiencing homelessness for a while you’re first time through Ahope what we’re gonna do is. We’re gonna wanna sit down with you and get some basic information and then about a week later we’re gonna sit down and do a formal intake where we might spend forty-five minutes with the client trying to learn their story. And every story’s unique there’s a lot of commonalities in homelessness but each person has a unique story and that’s what we try to learn. We try to identify what their needs are we try to see how our organization can meet those needs and from there what we’ll do is once we have a better idea of the bigger picture. We have the option of short of like this is more like triage we can divert them to one of several programs that Homeward Bound might offer. You know for folks who might need more intensive case management or we’ll do what we call a diversion and that is we try to solve their homelessness immediately and sometimes that can be done simply by buying someone a bus ticket. Can’t tell you how many times during the course of a month I have someone come in to my office and they’re in Asheville and they’re stuck, they’re stranded and then when I short of ask them some questions I find out they may have some family living in Charlotte or they may have a brother living in Greeneville who’d be willing to house them. They just can’t get there because they have no money. We’ll immediately buy them a bus ticket, if I can solve someone’s homelessness by buying somebody’s sixty-five-dollar bus ticket then that is a very good investment.

MB: Ok, I would like to ask a few more things about what you mentioned such as the practices and all that but right now may I ask how you got personally involved with Homeward Bound in Asheville, North Carolina?

BS: That’s a really good question. I’ve long been committed to social justice issues and this is short of like a second career for me. My primary career was in journalism, in print journalism, and as a documentary film maker and producer and writer. and I had worked on a documentary film where the central character was a man who had experienced homelessness here in Asheville and now I worked on that film about eight-nine years ago, but it always stuck with me. Again, he had a very unique story and it was a compelling story and he had received services here at Ahope. So, I was short- not introduced to the subject matter but really, I saw a face on it and it helped personalize it for me and so as a journalist it really sparked my interest and I’ve wrote a lot of news stories regarding city politics regarding budgets with the city council and whatnot. And homelessness is something that came up time and time again over the years. Now my original exposure to this issue dates back to when I was in college in the id 80’s in Washington D.C. I met a man named Mitch Snyder who is-who was one of the first national voices for this issue and he created an organization called the community for nonviolence in that organization staged a lot of sleep-ins, a lot of sit-ins, a lot of protests in Washington D.C. Mind you this is during the Reagan administration and it drew a lot of national media attention and I think it was what I think our nation woke up and realized that this Is not just a problem for cities like New York and Los Angeles it is a nationwide problem and it was growing. During the 80’s we saw huge slashes in mental health funding a lot of places that were formerly called institutions were eventually shut down and folks were turned down onto the streets with significant mental health issues and so we saw our homeless population during the 80’s just absolutely explode. So, that was my first exposure to it and then as a journalist I wrote about it and as a documentary filmmaker I short of put that angle on it. Later on, in life worked for an organization that was called the First Step Farm and this is in Candler outside of Asheville and that was a state funded long-term residential treatment facility for men and women experiencing-- in recovery from substance use disorder. From alcoholism, what we’ve short of changed terminology we’re trying to get away from terms like alcoholic and addict and person who’s in recovery from substance abuse disorder. So, while working at the First Step Farm as resident manager a lot of paper work came across my desk. People from all over the state were applying to get into this program because it was free and state funded. A lot of folks who’ve had nowhere else to go they were at the end of the road and a lot of those folks used as their main address, 19 North Anne Street, and I’ve kept seeing the same address over and over and over before I realized it was the Ahope Day Center. So, a lot of the clients that I’ve worked with were receiving—had received services from Ahope and Homeward Bound and that began my exposure to this organization and when I learned more about them and I needed a transition in my own career. I reached out to Homeward Bound and we found some mutual interests and I was lucky enough to secure a position here.

MB: Wow! That is a very interesting story honestly.

BS: Thank You.

MB: May I has your experience as a journalist and a documentary film producer and maker like give you any skill sets or anything that might have surprisingly helped within this work?

BS: You know I think so! Primarily, interviewing skills. In journalism, not every interview is rosy and easy. Sometimes you have to interview people who don’t want to be interviewed or interview—or people who are experiencing trauma and they can be very difficult and so over the years I’ve developed some skills, active listening and just being focused and patient. I’ve find that helps here because a lot of the people that we serve who are coming in off the streets have experienced significant trauma in their lives or they have profound mental health issues or they’ve just fallen down on their luck. [loud car passes outside on the road increasing noise pollution] and surviving on the streets can be very tough and so a lot of the folks who’re living on the streets wear a mask and I mean that figuratively. HA! Now with Covid we can mean that literally but they have to be hard they have to tough and I noticed that when they first come into my office and I shut that door and it’s just us. They kind of sigh relief and they can finally talk and say this is my story and it takes a while to develop that trust. But it’s crucial so you know interviewing skills [loud car engine roars outside] certainly come into play here that makes someone comfortable enough to probably tell the most difficult things in their life.

MB: [Slightly annoyed by loud engines outside] Ok, let’s see, you also mentioned worked with-- you also mentioned you worked with the men’s First Step Farm?

BS: Yes, it’s called the men’s First Step Farm.

MB: Yes, May I ask has that helped with working at Ahope Day Center were the-there any differences or similarities between the work did you find it easier to possibly transition from men’s first step farm?

BS: Yeah, there are a lot of commonalities. We do see a very high level of substance use disorder among people experiencing homelessness and that might be alcohol it might be methamphetamine, it might be opiates, it might be opioids. It is a high rate! We also see folks who are what’s called dual diagnoses meaning they have a substance use disorder and that is in association with a significant mental health disorder. And so, you might have someone who has a schizophrenia but they’re also using methamphetamines and then (14:26) psychosis and it can be every challenging at times. My work at first step farm really exposed me to the full spectrum of substance use disorder and working with people in recovery and not giving up and understanding the challenges that they face and understanding they are first and foremost people but they are people with a disease and that disease is substance use disorder and you have to approach it from that angle opposed to a judgmental angle.

MB: Alright, let’s see, ok, you are the Intake Case Manager there at the Ahope Day Center and Homeward Bound may I ask has this program changed in any way during the pandemic Such as like--

BS: Absolutely! Absolutely! This pandemic has turned everything upside down it has been a—well let’s just put it this way a challenging year to say the least but I am also very impressed by my organization and my colleagues and also our clients. How resilient they’ve been in response of the flexibility that we have seen but Covid changed everything you know like I said we went from you know being open from eight in the morning till seven-thirty and having anywhere from seventy-five to eighty people in this building. Getting sandwiches, drinking coffee, getting paperwork done, or just staying arm. And then we’ve had to have negations with the board of health we had to severely reduce that because we had to practice social distancing we couldn’t have seventy-five people crammed into something that—you know our building is short of like a big house—it’s not a big facility. Social distancing (16:20) came first and so we had to limit the number of people in the building we had programs that we—one of the minor programs we offer here at Homeward Bound was called “room in the inn” which is a program that we’ve been running for years. And that serves approximately fifteen women who’re experiencing homelessness and that was an overnight shelter that we provided—oh we administered at—essentially what it was, these women would spend one week at various churches in short of like church hall or something like that or the church gymnasium and each church would be the host for the week and so we’d have mattresses and we’d move them from church to church and we had over fifty-two faith groups that provided this shelter one week at a time. They also provided meals for the clients so the women would get dinner and then breakfast the next morning. We’d switch churches every week churches synagogues, and when Covid hits they all dropped out and we can’t blame them. Because most of the folks that volunteered to help us at these churches were high risk! they were elderly! So, they were being prudent and so during the at the inn program suddenly was facing its demise and so we had to scramble. We took Ahope and so for a period for about a month we made Ahope an overnight shelter and we would each take turns. One of us would be here all night. Then as we were short of-- it was a day by day thing, folks did not know what was going to happen the next day there was an outcry from our community that something had to be done to help the homeless because our governor was essentially stating that folks needed to “stay home and stay safe.” We were encouraged to do that, we were encouraged to work from home, we were encouraged to stay home unless it was vitally important but when you don’t have a home you don’t have that option, and where would these folks going to go? So, there was a public outcry the city of Asheville did finally respond and provided us with Harrah’s Cherokee Center also known as the Asheville civic center. So, within three days we went in and turned basically an arena into an emergency overnight shelter for sixty-five clients. It was an incredible amount of work with a lot of our—with a lot of help from not only from our organization but some other volunteer groups we were able to pull it off and it was amazing. So, we were able to bring sixty-five people off the street and provide them this shelter at the civic center. That was just a band aid and luckily, we were able to transition from that to a Fema funded, this a federally funded Covid emergency shelter, that we operated from a local motel down on Smokey Park Highway. And again, we have sixty-five clients there now. The civic center was temporary and that closed and so they transitioned over to this motel with obviously far more comfortable far more stable we’re able to have an office there in one of the rooms and we’re able to provide case management and a lot of these folks are really thriving. It shows what happens when even with basic shelter, a simple hotel room and an alarm clock and showers and a bed. A lot of the clients immediately went out and found work. within walking distance there were some fast food restaurants. So, it shows what could happen when you perhaps (20:08) first and I know a hotel room is just temporary housing but it’s still better than living under a bridge.

MB: Talking about that temporary shelter and housing. Can I ask how you guys actually maintained those because those were separately set apart from the Ahope Day Center and all that.

BS: We’ve actually had to hire some staff we’ve have folks there from eight in the morning till eight at night and there’s been funding provided by the government and by local— the city and the county to provide twenty-four-hour security there. So, there’s a security presence there twenty-four-hours a day and there’s a Homeward Bound staff there from eight in the morning until eight at night. [pause] Food is provided by community organizations that volunteer their services and local restaurants that volunteer meals. So, the clients there the idea behind it is to provide them a place where they can essentially practice social distancing and stay quote on quote at home. So, meals are provided laundry services are provided, the hotel has been accommodating in terms of helping us do that and we’re very grateful to have that. [Pause] But it is Again we administer the program but it is funded by Fema through our branch and right now we’re going month by month so we don’t know how long the program is going to last or how long Fema will fund it but I think we are showing a lot of local leaders like our city council and county commissioners that something like this could work. And we’re very encouraged by this success and they’re taking note. this hopefully could turn into something that could be funded through other agencies or other governments state or local.

MB: Alright, you mentioned before your volunteers had to stay overnight at the Ahope Day Center.

BS: pardon me.

MB: You mentioned that the volunteers had to stay overnight at the Ahope Day Center? At some point?

BS: No, I may have misspoke it wasn’t the volunteers it was the staff members like myself—

MB: Oh Ok.

BS: We would take turns. We did not want these fifteen women to go back out onto the street so we quickly decided to — look for example the office I’m in right now is my office, is maybe I don’t know ten feet by twelve feet. Suddenly I just took my laptop and took it out and put two mattresses in here and we had two women living in my office. So, my office became a temporary bedroom for two women. And all of my colleagues did the same thing. we turned this building into an overnight shelter and we ran that for approximately a month and a half before we were able to get the civic center open. So, in order to do this, we had to have the building staffed so we would each take turns, somebody might do a shift from four to midnight and somebody might do a shift from midnight to seven am and we still did our day jobs.

MB: Wow may I ask how that actually was were there any difficulties—

BS: Absolutely! it was challenging. But Homeward Bound is a very supportive organization when we needed time off, we got time off. We felt like we were getting frazzled absolutely. You can take a break and everyone top down from our executive director to the director of homeless services everyone took a turn. It was amazing to see the out pouring of support it was essentially all hands-on deck in order to make this work.

MB: Speaking at the Ahope Day Center and what you guys did turned it into an all-over the night center> May I ask how what other practices were you guys doing besides social distancing and turning the day center. Like yeah

BS: You mean right now?

MB: Yes, what type of—

BS: I’ll give you a great example. One of the biggest services we provide here is mail. We serve upwards of two-hundred clients a day. An estimated homeless population conservatively at five-hundred and a lot of folks use 19 North Anne Street, our address as their address. So, it’s not uncommon for us to receive several hundred pieces of mail a day maybe a dozen packages from FedEx or ups or whatnot. Folks need an address they’re trying to for example get a social security check or apply for disability or maybe even get an id from the DMV. So, the mail here is huge and it’s very important to our client they check their mail almost daily and we have several hundred-piece come in. In fact, as you called Mondays are our busiest mail days because we get Mondays mail a Saturdays mail because we’re not here on Sunday. Easily six-hundred seven-hundred pieces of mail and a dozen packages that we have to short and have ready by the morning. One of the biggest challenges is we did lose a lot our volunteers here. Here at the Ahope Day Center and Homeward Bound as a whole had a lot of volunteers and some of those volunteers had to step back because again they may have had a Covid vulnerability. Either a preexisting health condition that might make them vulnerable or simply age they might be a senior citizen and decided it was in their best interest to maybe not volunteer. Now the volunteers that we have now are still a handful of them stuck with us and everyone there—we all wear masks we wear gloves we sanitize. But getting back to the mail that was something that used to be done inside the building. People will come in have a cup of coffee and a sandwich, while they waited for their mail to be checked. We can no longer do that. We actually do that out of our windows, we have a window that looks just like a kitchen window. We open it up at eight-am we have someone sitting there with a clipboard. The clients comes around the outside of the building so they actually don’t ever enter the building. They give a name we put it on a clipboard and we check their mail, we hand that mail through the window. That’s been one the biggest changes, we’ll have a line going all the way down (27:12) the building waiting for people—people waiting to get their mail checked. That’s one example. Something as simple as a cup of coffee. We used to go through probably six or seven maybe eight big multi gallon urns of coffee a day. It’s a simple pleasure but when you’re sleeping outside in the cold a hot cup of coffee can make a difference. Again, we used to do that in the building well we set up the table outside again it’s to promote social distancing. [pause]

MB: Ok, let’s see. And the volunteers are handling this really well I assume the—

BS: Excuse me?

MB: Are The volunteers at the Ahope Day Center are adjusting to this pretty well I assume.

BS: Oh yeah, the volunteers are fantastic very resilient we couldn’t do this without them.

MB: And you guys are being adequately supplied such as again you mentioned the coffee and sandwiches at some point you guys getting enough food, and masks, and blankets and stuff like that?

BS: Well we really don’t do food per say. We used to do peanut butter and jelly sandwiches short of make your own. Obviously, we can’t do that anymore. We stay in communication with other agencies here in town that work with people experiencing homelessness agencies such as the Western Carolina Rescue Mission, ABCCM--Asheville Buncombe County Christian Ministries, another organization is the Heyward street congregation they provided services and so we tried to not duplicate services. For example, ABCCM is the go to place if you need clothing they have a clothing closet, meals best places to get the meals would be the—they alternate days so the Rescue Mission might do one day, ABCCM might do another day. We’re the go to place for housing and maybe a cup of coffee. It’s just an effort not to replicate services and we’re all mind you we’re all within a couple block radius from each other.

[Pause]

MB: Speaking on donations that I know like that some homeless shelters I have spoken with Western Carolina Ministries to also get another outlook and viewpoint on what’s happening right now and they mention they mostly operate on donations is the case for Ahope or Homeward Bound or do you guys get like different grants I think you mentioned before?

BS: No absolutely. We have multiple funding streams there’s money that comes from the federal government through a grant there’s money that comes from the state there’s money that comes from the county there’s money that comes from the city but we also rely on heavily on private donations. Folks that are just gonna send us anywhere from twenty dollars to a few months ago, I think we had somebody donate a hundred-and seventy-five thousand dollars. That is instrumental for non-profits like us we couldn’t do it on just government funding alone. We do rely heavily on donations from the public and it’s not just monetary donations. In fact, on our website we’ll put out a wish list like “hey we need socks” it’s one of the biggest things we go through here at Ahope is—We try to give a person a pair of socks, a pair of clean socks. I’ll back up a little bit prior to Covid we used to be able to provide laundry services and we did that by working in conjunction with a couple of laundry mats here in town that were willing to allow our clients to come in on one day of the week and do one wash and one dry, one load. and that’s critical If you’re living on the streets if your living in the woods your living under a bridge. You’re getting your clothes dirty and staying clean is important staying clean during the pandemic is extremely important unfortunately we lost those laundry mats again because of social distancing concerns. So, now if your experiencing homelessness in Asheville there is nowhere for you to do laundry and it is unfortunate.

MB: OK, you mentioned preparing beforehand like before the pandemic did you guys do anything else to potentially prepare for the Covid-19 2020 pandemic as you saw it coming. I know the western Carolina Rescue Ministries immediately when they heard what was happening in Wuhan they started to prepare.

BS: Yeah, we did to we came up with short of multiple strategies. Again, we had to be flexible because things were very fluid. we didn’t know what sort of directives we were gonna get from the governor we didn’t know what directives we’re gonna get from the county commissioners, from our city council. There were different levels of how safe do we need to be it was all very gray in the very beginning. So, we came up with some strategies of staffing. What would we do if one of us came down with Covid and had to quarantine and then had contact with other employees. Well if seven or eight of us here at Ahope got wiped out because of quarantine then who was the backup players. Who could we bring form another department within Ahope—excuse me within Homeward Bound so that we can keep the facility up and running. So, our director Nicole Brown was instrumental in providing a really just unbelievable scheduling and back up schedules and back up schedules to the backup schedules in case it hit the fan. So, we definitely spent a lot of time strategizing about what we’ll do if it hits here. Particularly with our clients and knock on wood we have not really been hit. I’ve heard reports of maybe one or two clients that have tested positive I haven’t heard of any clients being hospitalized or anything like that. So, we know that this virus can spread particular quickly within the homeless population and luckily, we haven’t experienced that yet and so maybe it’s because we’re all taking these precautions or whatever it is we’re gonna keep doing it and we’re gonna keep knocking on wood and hope that this virus does not visit our community.

MB: Ok, I’m not sure if you mentioned this or not. We did discuss programs earlier about how those changed. Did you have to make like when it comes to ending homelessness in that area and trying to get people into housing I’m assuming you guys had to meet face to face correct?

BS: Could you repeat your question it was a little bit garbled.

MB: Sorry about that. We earlier discussed programs and how those changed and you gave answers about the room in the inn. May I ask when it comes to other programs like such as ending (homelessness) with housing and I assume these are usually done face to face. Did those change at all? Like the interactions—

BS: Yeah, it we tried to do as much as we can over the phone but again a lot of our clients do even have phones so what we’ll do is—in my case I’ll wait for Ahope to close at noon. And if I have to do something that’s very intensive with a client that’s maybe very paper work heavy or a lot of like talking back and forth what I’ll do is I’ll ask that client to come in after we close. For example, how you and I are talking right now that’s during my office hours. So, we’ll close the doors at noon but our staff is here until three-thirty and so I’ll actually set appointments with clients now. Instead of it being short of like a walk-in I’ll say “you know what why don’t we wait till we close and this building is empty and then you and I can sit at two-o’clock and we’ll knock out some paper work.” So, there’s more of that so it’s just really more of logistical planning. (35:35) Get here at that time. So, we’ve gotta be a little more flexible the clients gotta be a little more flexible. But it seems to be working so far. As far as programs changing there’s no deliquiate way to put this but there has been a bit of a silver lining with the Covid virus and that is there has been an increase in grant money available to organizations such as ourselves. and we are accessing those grants and we’re applying for more grants I think the government is realizing that it is critical to provide people with housing in a pandemic and so just in the past couple of weeks we were awarded a number of grants that we’re now accessing. I’ve housed my first two clients using one of these grants. Was able to help them with their first three months of rent and it was a fantastic feeling. I got two people of the street and housed using one of these grants. Both clients had (36:38) Covid vulnerabilities conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to Covid and so that was one of the qualifications for that grant. was able to get them housed in under a month with some rental assistance for the first three months’ secure deposit assistance all this funding wasn’t available pre Covid and now it is. So, it’s a bit of a silver lining like life gives you lemons make lemonade.

MB: Yes sir, that is definitely good. Talking about the—this is going to be an interesting question and I understand if you do not want to answer it because it might go into the realm of political discussion but—and I know how hard that might be to answer and how you might not want to answer but what is your reaction about for example working with the government and taking these grants and all that for Ahope center and Homeward Bound.

BS: I’m not directly involved in applying for the grants we have a whole different division here within Homeward Bound a grant specialist their job is to search out these grants write the grant proposal and secure the grant. I guess I’m on the lucky end I get to spend it. In fact, that’s one of our jobs here. once you get a grant you just can’t sit on that money that’s grants purpose is to get out there in the community and help people. So, that’s where the work comes in and on the back end is actually distributing this money and finding the clients that meet he qualifications for it and getting that paper work in and we have a team that does that. I don’t see it as a political issue I see that there is funding available to help people and if we can secure that funding great!

MB: Ok, you also mentioned, what was it, yeah, alongside your programs and flexibility did you have any additional responsibilities besides the program that arrived with the Pandemic?

BS: Sure yea, absolutely. One of those responsibilities was for a while I wasn’t coming to Ahope I was actually working at the emergency hotel shelter helping get that off the ground. and helping to run that and providing my services there out of a make shift hotel room we converted into an office. So, I spent quite a bit of time there and then finally started to transition back into my role here at Ahope because we were actually hired additional staff to fil those hotel slots so I was wearing many hats for the first couple of months of this virus. I work for the room at the in program I worked here overnight, I worked at the Civic center and then I worked at the emergency hotel shelter for Covid and then transitioning back here. So, yeah it just had to be really flexible and willing to take on whatever tasks that was in front of you.

MB: Again, you mentioned the temporary shelter May I ask was this due to spacing so this was for social distancing purposes like a better way to—

BS: Absolutely. It was to provide—to help with social distancing but also the order from the governor was to stay home and stay safe and that was repeated over and over “stay home and stay safe.” If you don’t have a home, then you need a place to go to.

MB: Ok, so—

BS: (coughs) That’s essential that was the philosophy behind these emergency shelters and it was also to help-- we brought in some medical staff we were able to screen people and we were able to get people tested. We were able to link people to medical services. And essentially provide an emergency over the night shelter in a time when it was dangerous to be out on the streets.

MB: Ok so these weren’t-- for example an increase in homeless individuals suddenly?

BS: Yeah, I’ll speak to that. We, obviously, we have a phone here and we get phone messages every day. We are so busy during the mornings from eight until noon when we’re open that we really don’t have time to answer that phone. that phone goes directly to voice mail and then in the afternoon from noon until three-thirty the staff here myself included we take turns clearing out the voce mails and returning those phone calls that day. And we may have from anywhere from fifty-ninety voice mails every day. And we’re seeing an increase in that and we’re also seeing a similar type message and it’s someone calling saying “I’m about to become homeless and it’s because of the Covid virus. I lost my job or my husband lost his job. we can’t pay our rent we’ve run out of options we’re living out of our car now” that’s the phone call that we’re seeing increase and it’s coming from all over Western North Carolina it’s not just Asheville or buncombe county. And people are shocked these are people that never ever thought they would lose their housing and they are now losing their housing. Now granted we had an eviction moratorium and then eviction moratorium was lifted and then it’s been put in place again. And that rent keeps racking up and people are now starting to be evicted. And so there are estimates right now I’ve read that an estimated forty-million people in this country can lose their housing because of the Covid economy. And were seeing our share here and we’re already started seeing it. We have folks that sometimes just show up at our doorstep and said “that’s it I’m homeless as of today,” and just the look of shock on their face the look of fear the look of uncertainty. It’s hard.

MB: Yes, suddenly losing your home out of nowhere because just could not get any income and the landlord also needs an income and that comes in the form of that. I know that like-I read that Homeward Bound works closely with landlords sometimes.

BS: We do! We have a program within Homeward Bound where we try to prevent people from becoming homeless. So, if you live within Asheville or Buncombe county and you have been served with eviction papers we do have a couple staff members here that will try to reach out to that landlord and see if we can financially help this person stay where they are. Now it’s not a long-term solution it’s a band aid but if we can prevent someone from becoming homeless by writing that landlord a check for a thousand dollars in the long run it saves money. On average to be homeless in Asheville it costs anywhere from twenty-seven to fifty thousand dollars a year for a homeless person. In terms of the social services that they require, accessing the emergency room when they could be seeing a doctor, using social services. Everything that you could think of that these various agencies not just Homeward Bound but ABCCM, Western Carolina Rescue Ministries all of that does have a price tag! To be homeless is expensive it costs in municipalities, it costs the county, it costs the city, it costs the state, whatever. Someone’s paying tax dollars are at work, and so if we can write a landlord a check for a thousand dollars and keep that person from becoming homeless and hopeful they can turn things around we will do that.

MB: Ok, so Homeward Bound is helping combat people becoming homeless due to evictions. I did read somewhere that Homeward Bound did help disperse about two-hundred thousand dollars to—

BS: I believe, yeah, I believe so, I believe so, yeah. We’ll also put them in touch with an organization that gives legal services who (45:11) volunteer lawyers—not volunteers nonprofit law firm essentially that helps people who can’t afford an attorney to be able to work for something like an eviction and may be forestall it or present it.

MB: Ok--

BS: but by all means that’s what we call diversion if we can prevent you from being homeless everyone wins.

MB: OK, now let me ask let’s see here. I’m going to ask a bit more personal information if that’s ok like—such as has the pandemic itself or the changes at Homeward Bound or the Ahope Day Center effected (45:54) and all of this that’s been going on here?

BS: It’s been very difficult I’m not gonna kid you. I had to take some time off just to—you know in this profession it can be very draining physically and emotionally. And Sometimes you gotta put yourself--self-care sometimes should be a priority and we’ll all working with the understanding that if we need to step back and take a couple days off we’d do that if that means if we come back and better serve a client. So yeah, I did reach a point where I was just drained. I’ve been working various hours sometimes overnight sometimes early in the morning but also just the emotional strength of working with a very (46:43) population and that’s by the fact that this pandemic is going on and yeah we certainly work in a high risk environment we very much consider ourselves not only essential workers but frontline workers and it was hard and it still is hard but this is the new reality and we’re just going to have to cope and e we’re found the best we can to do that.

MMB: May I ask if there is anything you would like to discuss, anything you would like to mention?

BS: You know I think it’s great that your university is doing this and I think this is something that needs to be documented and I think oral history is a fantastic way to do it. There’s a lot of stories out there, there are a lot of stories mines just one and you know knock on wood I’m housed I’ve got employment I’m one of the lucky ones but I’m certainly hoping your university is reaching out to people living on the margins and getting their stories as well.

MB: Yes, sir that we definitely are. I was definitely concerned about the homeless population and wandering how they were doing due to numerous news stories of people like living in Las Vegas living like living in parking lots kind of and use parking spaces as way to mark where to put people.

BS: Yes, correct.

MB: May I ask for the exact location, the address, phone numbers any way to contact Homeward Bound or the Ahope Day Center for people who would like to volunteer or donate.

BS: Absolutely. Our address is 19 North Anne Street and that’s in Asheville, North Carolina and the zip code is 28801. That’s for things like socks and sandwiches and basic hygiene essentials sometimes people drop of thirty-four bars of soap or something like that or bottles of shampoo all of that’s welcomed. For bulk donations, we encourage people to—we actually have a designated donation shelter and this is a sort of like a warehouse that we have and that is located in Woodfin our donation center for Homeward Bound is located at 205 Elk Park Drive that’s three words, Elk, Park Drive and that’s in Woodfin, 28804.

MB: Ok, is that all, any more information you could possibly share?

BS: Sure, the phone number for the Ahope Day Center hang on a second I gotta get that I never call it myself so gonna look it up actually. [pause as Brian looks up Ahope Day Centers phone number] One second.

MB: No problem take your time.

BS: The number is 8282-252-8883

MB: Ok with this number they can contact you to ask about volunteering, donations anyway to contact Homeward Bound.

BS: That one number I gave you is for the Ahope Day Center the number for the donations -- and also, we accept donations of furniture, gently used furniture. Because when we house a client, when we move them in we move them in with everything beds, tables, chairs a couch, dishes, bed, a mop and a broom and those donations can be dropped off to the donation center I mentioned in Woodfin and let’s see here I’m trying to find that number. I will give you the main number which is 828-258-1695. Ok?

MB: Ok I’m sure that someone who is listening or reading the transcript will potentially see this and help out.

BS: My personal cell phone number in case you need to follow up with me you have that already—

MB: Ah yes sir.

BS: I’ll give it to you again. 828-774-9108 and that’s my work cellphone.

MB: Ok no problem. Yes sir, thank you for taking the time for this interview I hope the Ahope Day Center, Homeward Bound the entirety of the homeless population of Buncombe County, western North Carolina and all those people you serve and work with the best. I do think Asheville and the entire population of Asheville thank you for your help during this time assisting the homeless population.

BS: It’s our pleasure, its rewarding work, its necessary work, thank you.

MB: Thank you!

[END OF INTERVIEW]