

Peace Okoko

Interview Profile Richard Uniacke

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“Never Waste a Good Crisis”

Richard Uniacke's slogan throughout our interview was "Never waste a good crisis".

Two weeks ago, Richard Uniacke, the executive director for the Bridges Outreach in Newark, received a call from a social worker, Emma, at University Hospital. The call informed him that Bill, a person experiencing homelessness had recovered from COVID-19. Bill needed to be discharged, explained the social worker, but he could not be put into a shelter without a referral from Bridges Outreach. Bridges Outreach is a NGO dedicated to homeless populations. Unlike other programs and homeless shelters, Bridges Outreach develops and sustains outreach programs that focus on individual cases; offering a support system for each one of those individuals. Covid-19 presents a particular challenge to homeless populations, since shelters are hesitant to accept recovered patients.

After the pandemic reached New Jersey, Bridges Outreach changed their approach to help those experiencing homelessness. Right before our interview Richard informed me he was getting ready to go to Newark Penn station to talk to those seeking shelter. Richard and his team are on the streets of Newark from 9am -11pm. Equipped with N95 masks, each day Richard and his team engage with people that are unsheltered. After asking if the people have the symptoms associated with Coronavirus or if they've been around anyone who does, Richard and his team provide these unsheltered homeless with the means of getting to a hospital, whether that means driving them directly (if they don't have symptoms) or contacting 911 on their behalf.

Richard claims, “The idea of somebody who had recovered and was now to be introduced into a 350 bed homeless shelter is a very scary thing and we have no protocol.” With the pandemic just hitting the United States, there was no protocol set by the CDC. Richard explains, “CDC at the time was saying two consecutive tests...Nobody has enough TESTs to do two consecutive tests.” The CDC said two consecutive negative tests were required to show someone had fully recovered. At the time New Jersey was running out of tests in its free testing sites. New Jersey testing centers had long lines that forced people to wait for hours. Hospitals were preserving the few number of tests they had. Bill could not prove his recovery. Bill could not go to a shelter.

Richard calls the Division of Family Assistance and Benefits(DFAB) offices. DFAB gives temporary assistance to people in need. DFAB covers emergency housing, medical and financial assistance to those who are eligible. DFAB instructs Richard to call the Essex County offices for more information on the situation.

Essex County controls the flow of money distributed in the region. The officials know the steps needed to get money to people in need. People like Bill . Newark falls under Essex County. Richard calls the Essex County offices. The official suggests missing paperwork might be the culprit behind Bill's housing delay. . Essex County officials advise him to contact the Division of Family Assistance and Benefits(DFAB).

DFAB requires a referral to establish that aid is needed. The referral allows DFAB to pay for Bills' housing. DFAB sends Richard an email stating, "University hospital does know how to handle the situation through DFAB...here is the guy that knows how to do it." To Richard's surprise Emma is the one responsible for doing the referrals. The DFAB representative includes Emma's information in the email. Confused, Richard sends an email saying, " No, no ,no that is the guy who called me looking for help... so we still have a problem." Richard informs the official that Bill got denied from DFAB because he is getting SSD. SSD is provided to New Jersey residents that are disabled. According to Richard Bill's SSFH dollars or supportive services for the homeless were supposed to kick in. Allowing Bill to pay for a hotel room.

Richard adamantly explains,"The supportive services money had not kicked in because the system was reliant on a piece of paper going from one office (University Hospital) to the next office (DFAB)...with everybody virtual...it was just-roadblock after roadblock after roadblock."Richard is back where he started.

Richard calls the social worker and asks about the referral. While speaking to the worker, Richard realizes the DFAB official was right; confirming there was paperwork missing that needed to be transferred from Universal Hospital to DFAB. The paperwork could not be processed because of the coronavirus.

Richard frustratingly recalls, "I had to get the guy from the county to figure this out. Call the DFAB representative to call University hospital...and meanwhile there are people literally dying for that hospital bed."

Bill received his referral and is now staying in a hotel for 90 days.

If Richard had not handled Bill's situation, Bill would have had to call 2-1-1. Richard says, "[New Jersey's] knee jerk [solution is to ] call 2-1-1...[2-1-1] is supposed to be the hotline where if you are homeless and unsheltered they can connect you to shelter.Richard adds, "the volume of calls has increased from 100 a day to 700 and they have not been able to handle it." After calling the number himself, Richard experiences a 45 minute wait time. The 2-1-1 number has been slammed with phone calls. Long waiting times are a product of the influx of calls.

Richard reiterates, "...the 2-1-1 the number designated for people experiencing homelessness in New Jersey has had a backlog of calls." Newark only had one emergency housing unit for the unsheltered before the pandemic. The colloquial name for the emergency center is 2-2-4. If there are no beds available at that shelter then there were no more beds available in the city of Newark. Richard remarked "Housing for asymptomatic unsheltered New Jersey residents was only establish a week ago"

When discussing possible solutions, Richard pointed to reframing homelessness as the most important thing people can do. He said the first thing is to see homelessness as a temporary experience and not a person's defining characteristic. The word homeless creates a monolith. This makes people ignore the individual stories and the individual situations that people are facing that lead them to lacking a home. It frames them as abstract beings that are out of reach. This makes it harder for people to empathize with them and we begin to accept Richard is not new to working with underrepresented populations. Before working at Bridges he worked at the Food Bank of New Jersey to combat food insecurity.

The next step Richard says is to not get accustomed to seeing homelessness everywhere we go. Richard warns that seeing people experiencing homelessness has become a fact of life that many have gotten used to but it does not have to be.

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