

The State of Missoula's Path to End Homelessness

A synopsis of how the goal to solve homelessness has reshaped the town and ways the town can shift to help the community thrive better.

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Introduction

Missoula is home to many people that have come here to enjoy the amenities. Whether you like to swim, bike, hike, ski, participate in the arts, enjoy sports camaraderie, or just like to sit and drink coffee alone on a bench Missoula is the place to do it.

Missoula's cost of housing is high, but it has not always been that way. After the pandemic allowed many people to begin working from home Missoula saw an increase in population. The housing boom that happened during COVID made this destination spot sought after by many people. Before the pandemic Missoula had not seen anything that suggested the town should prepare for people to have bidding wars for property.

Over a decade ago Missoula set out to change the way our community meets homelessness. This decision dramatically affected the manner this community helps the residents navigate adversity. After we began that journey the cost of housing went up and made it harder for people to afford to live here. A representative with Missoula Housing Authority recently stated there are 2,000 people on the waiting list for housing vouchers. The only time housing vouchers come available is when someone stop using the program, moves or dies. Most people that qualify for vouchers qualify for the program their entire life. Many residents that utilize the program work in vital jobs that carry the city, and do not get paid enough to afford to live here. There are also many people in the community on disability and in retirement that utilize the voucher program. The City of Missoula recently chose to close the Johnson Street Warming Shelter. The reason for the choice was directly due to budgeting constraints. There has also been violence within the unhoused community due to lack of structure around the services. This analysis is meant to help everyone get another angle of how we help our peers through adversity.

Missoula has many organizations that are designed to help catch people before they lose housing. The town consistently funds tools that keep people moving forward. Most of the money donated is earmarked to resources to help people before they lose their housing. Missoula has consistently been a place where you can bounce back after adversity. The increase in housing cost, and lack of resources, have caused a few people to stumble harder than they needed too. Leaning back into what Missoula has done before can help rebalance the community.

Increased Nonprofit Participation in Emergency Services and Healthcare

Over the last decade Missoula has leaned heavily into the nonprofits in the community. The manner that each nonprofit addresses adversity differs, significantly. Some nonprofits lead people to services that help them practice executing behaviors that are needed to survive. Some nonprofits utilize professionals to diagnose people with a mental illness so that they can fast track them into a path that pays for the services they provide. This path requires that a person stay dependent on others to keep their services. The difference between these two examples, in direction of goals, changes the behaviors that a person executes daily. This change in direction creates a behavior set, that has a deficit of crucial behaviors that keep a person's mind and body thriving. As an example Missoula utilized Housing First principles and chose to bypass many steps that usually are executed by an individual. The housing sprint was used to put people directly into apartments, they would be responsible to maintain the behaviors to keep after 3 months. Several of the people that had the cost waived had not done the behaviors needed to pay monthly rent after the three months were over, and lost their apartment. When they reflected on their experience they were upset that the City of Missoula set them up for failure and humiliation. The Housing First approach left some participants without the ability to successfully function with the new environmental requirements. Before putting people into housing, structure could have prepared them for success.

Who Utilizes Homeless Services

Behaviors are situation specific. Formulating structures of organizations around what should be individual treatment goals can often create imbalances within community resources. The following section covers the ways different structural models, of helping people through adversity, functions within a community. This section covers three examples of people that live within the unhoused population, and direct ways local government can address the issues these examples encounter. While there are people that have severe mental disabilities that require complete reliance on others, most are already connected with case workers that have been helping them manage their housing needs.

Example 1: (She) She has been living on the streets for several decades. A long time ago someone tried to help and made her feel like she could not function so she quit. Now she lives off the kindness of others.

Solution for She: She has been living a life where she does not need to execute many behaviors to get by. She often finds places that allow homeless populations to sleep on the streets because she never wants to have to talk to anyone ever again. When cities decrease homeless services and change laws She has to find somewhere new to live or learn to adapt back into society. She could work a job but the amount of tasks that are required to get from where she is into a position are overwhelming.

Example 2: (He) He has recently went through a major trauma and it left him living on the streets. His trauma has jolted his nervous system and the constant stress has left him extremely grouchy. He often avoids talking to people because the amount of extremely difficult situations that he has navigated alone has brought him to not want to talk to people, that do not understand the effects of getting through a massive amount of stress. He has withdrawn from the world, because the moments that he was navigating adversity other people were shifting the conversations the herd is having. By the time he was able to get back into his social circle the herd had moved on from old topics and he has no idea how to get talking to his peers again. He does not want to explain why certain topics now stress him out more, because the only time he needs to explain the information is when people have no experience going through adversity of any kind. The manner in which people that have never experienced anything talk down to him irritates him greatly because he knows that their ability to speak about subjects the way they do is because they were privileged enough to have never dealt with it, yet their words always seem to say that they would have handled his life better than he has. He doesn't want to ask anyone that has never dealt with adversity for help because they have mis-categorized his stress as a mental illness and caused him to lose custody of his kid instead of get help with stress relief (which made the entire experience ten times more traumatizing).

Solution for He: He has been pushing himself to work and function through everything. His ability to execute behaviors after stress, that shocks his system, is high because he

has spent his life readjusting and executing new behaviors every time he has walked through adversity. All he needs is a new path with a new set of behaviors and solutions to his stress. This may include understanding how to manage physical pain, finding a new career with Vocational Rehabilitation, saving money and managing debts. At no point does he need a payee to manage his money forever, but he may need someone to point him towards credit and debt counseling. He just needs a safe space to sleep, and a place to regroup to get his things in order again. It should take him no longer than six months to heal, find a new job, and learn to get back into the swing of things again. In environments where people try to tell him that he needs to follow their way he is more likely to withdraw and keep from re-assimilating with society (especially if they do not understand how much pain their incorrect models caused his life). In the past people in the same situation as He had less obstacles. Missoula had previously focused on getting people back into employment after experiencing adversity and trauma. Occupational therapy can be utilized to help people navigate issues.

Example 3: (They) They were born not caring about the same things as everyone else. At some point the difference between what they want to talk about and what other people want to talk about led some people to believing they needed more help than they actually do. Truth be told, if they were given the correct models instead of being around people that thought they couldn't repeat models, they would have assimilated into society a lot more successfully. Instead the parents of them did everything and assumed they would never be able to learn tasks for themselves. Now their parents are no longer around and they are stuck on the streets without understanding what behaviors they need to do to get back into society. Their parents did not help them learn to cook, clean, or work. Now They need the community to help them learn if they are ever going to be able to thrive.

Solution for They: They has a limited understanding of what they need to navigate issues in survival. They needs a social worker, that is paid by Medicaid, to help them navigate the issues of surviving without knowing how to do all of the tasks that keep them independent. The social worker coordinates the payee that helps They save their money and pays their bills, hire an aid to help coordinate making crucial appointments, and keeps track of all required paperwork that needs updated to maintain their life. They will always need the help of a social worker and knows it. Many times people going through situational adversity that shocks their system get misunderstood as needing the same level of help. Those people often push against getting help because they do not want the same level of dependency on other people that They requires to be safe and thrive.

The models that communities use to address behavioral change within a population are repeated by the entire population, because the herd always asks around to find out how to handle issues that arise. Over the last decade there have been many people studying the human experience that have began using natural parts of our animal experience to diagnose people as having a mental illness. People, that have not experienced something on their own, often go into fields that analyze the behaviors of people navigating changes in their life because they want to understand what they do

not. For instance: when a person experiences something that requires them to advocate for themselves, after not advocating for themselves at all, will start to increase assertive behaviors. The increase of assertive behaviors is a natural way that the body starts preparing a person to speak when it is uncomfortable. When this set of behaviors is analyzed through the psychiatric field any behavior change that is meant to help transition a person's life leads to a mental illness diagnoses. It is important that we do not limit our understanding of the animal experience with the memorized academic knowledge of someone that has no applicable personal experience.

To understand this concept let's highlight two possible paths to helping Joe through adversity. Joe has gone through a ton of adversity in his life. In fact it seems like the point of his life is to stand up over and over and over after getting hit from the side. Recently Joe had an injury that caused him to lose his job. Joe's injury takes about 6 to 8 weeks to heal physically from. During this time Joe was put on bedrest so that he did not harm the healing process. Joe has to navigate taking care of himself, cleaning up after himself while in massive amounts of pain, and maintaining taking care of all other aspects of life. Joe also has a child he cares for while navigating this adversity.

The manner that Joe is helped either strengthens his family or breaks it. While Joe does need people looking in on him, Joe does not need people trying to control him. When we learn to help parents go through adversity successfully, with their child, we strengthen how much that kid will successfully navigate as an adult. If the community taught the child to fear stress that child would fear navigating events that are just part of life. Instilling fear of the future into a child, because we lack the patience to walk with their family kindly, teaches that child that they will never be able to trust people that try to help. After adversity people should not be diagnosed with a mental illness. It can take up to two years to get back to what was once normal after experiencing adversity. When we push people too hard we break them, their families, and our community. Missoula has a lack of housing vouchers and our lack of assistance right now may mean that Joe and his child end up on the streets after Joe worked hard through everything life threw at him. If we utilized the shelters and other alternative housing in this community, with structure, we could help people continue to stay within the herd. Improperly using resources and sending out press releases of how we have opened our town's resources to the entire nation's homeless population has brought a lot of people here to get help. This means that our peers, our families, and the people within this community do not have easy access to the resources that they helped fund and build. It also means that the community has taken on a job that we will have to use behavioral therapy to execute because people are going to need to save money and work to get into housing, and they will need to learn to adjust using new behavioral choices.

Building dependency into social models, that address navigating adversity, impedes a person's ability to function through future situations. To understand how social models, within our resource system, shape the choices of others let's review herd behaviors. When a member of the herd goes through a new experience they look

into the herd for the solution to their obstacle. Which means that if we take over when people are stressed and do all of the things they need to survive, the next time they are stressed they will shut down and assume someone will take over. If the herd taught coping skills and connected people to outlets, that help them move through hard times more easily, they would get better at navigating tasks while stressed.

Sarah has experienced a major medical issue and needs to recover. The procedure has caused her to have heightened stress responses during and after recovery. These heightened responses are a normal part of the human experience after trauma. Many people find that solutions that help people, repeat the behaviors required to survive, helps the nervous system adjust naturally through the healing process. Too strong of a medication can cause permanent damage to a person's cognitive function because the person gets relief before the pressure build up shifts their experience. An example of this is allowing a child to have a temperature because the process within the body is meant to raise the temperature to kill the virus. Which means that the experience of running a temperature is not because the illness created it, but it is part of the body's natural mechanisms. Just as the pressure from stress pushes the body to focus on what is causing added stress to a person's life, the temperature from a fever pushes out disease. When we jump to conclusions about the human experience we limit our ability to evolve with changing environments.

There are negative effects to using psychiatric diagnosis instead of utilizing occupational therapy to change the situation. Many people have found the diagnosis to limit what they feel they are capable of navigating. While some professionals still use psychiatric diagnosis, most have strayed away from it because it is often harmful and wrong. Everyone deserves a second chance after their stress event and trauma. Misunderstandings of people, due to incorrect categorization, have caused major issues in many families. It also impedes people's ability to feel like they can make it through a stress event. Stress events often cause heightened stress responses, when people are told that they are incapable of doing something while extremely stressed it makes the side effects of stress worse, and stops people from feeling capable of moving forward.

Helping people navigate life after adversity takes nothing but an ear to listen, safe streets, and clear steps forward. Many of the services require that people meet eligibility requirements. We shouldn't lean into making mental illness a requirement to get anything people need. Most people can pull themselves out of a moment and recover from any side effects caused by stress. While there are some mental illnesses that are not stress related, many diagnosis stem from someone looking for help with stress. With the current conversations within state and federal branches of government around transgender rights it is best to protect the community by not leaning into something that has been used to harm others. Each family will adapt to, and go through, stress events differently. Each family is composed of the personalities within. Each family needs to bend to help each personality within find solutions that work for their individual experience, as a group at the same time.

There are many components to ending up unhoused. Many times it starts with a financial emergency, an accident, or a job loss. The environment these things happen in either sets up our peers for success, or it can end up making their life worse. The responsibility that government has over the wellbeing of all people is often debated. Communities that take time to build connection with all people thrive better, and Missoula has historically done that well.

Utilizing Structures That Already Exist Within Government

Social Security, Unemployment, and TANF:

These funds are designed to make sure the citizens of the nation can survive. Social Security was originally set up to protect the retirement of the nation's work force. Over the years Social Security has expanded into branches that serve different populations, Social Security Disability benefits is one example. TANF is supplemental income that people apply for with the Office of Public Assistance. Unemployment benefits can help people who have been laid off, had hours reduced, had to quit a job, or discharged.

Voc. Rehab., Maximus, and Job Services:

Rehabilitation, occupational therapy, and job training are services that are funded all of the time. Those that are receiving SNAP and/or TANF benefits are eligible to work with Maximus. These services help people understand what steps to take to reach their goals and earn an income, even if on disability. The staff at Vocational Rehabilitation know how to help people calculate what jobs they can work to keep their full benefits.

Occupational therapy, job training, trade training, higher education, Job Corps:

Occupational therapy, job training, and other higher education opportunities can help a person get from one way of life to another. Each of these opportunities help community members make behavior changes. To apply for a job a person must understand how to fill out the application and answer interview questions. To do the job a person needs to understand the information and actions required to execute the position. Seeking higher education can be used to help community members obtain more knowledge and learned behaviors that is required for certain careers.

Food stamps (SNAP), food bank, and meal planning:

Access to food is an important part of survival. The federal government primarily funds the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP is a nationwide program that gives people that qualify extra money every month towards their food costs. Food banks exist in communities that have had people within active enough to get them started. Meal planning can cut food budgets substantially. Potatoes, bags of carrots, beans, crock pot meals, oatmeal, and pasta are all cheap last minute grabs. A bag of potatoes costs \$3.00 and has enough to feed 8 people a simple meal. When you do not have very much money you have to cut costs anyway you can. Financial emergencies require changes in spending in order to get through without adding more stress.

Paying medical bills (Medicaid, Medicare, health insurance, health shares):

Medical expenses can hit you from the side and knock you down. Medicaid can cover bills up to three months before the application was turned in, if the applicant qualified for the program during those months. This means that if something happens and you do not have insurance, if the medical procedure put you out of work enough to qualify for Medicaid your bills from that timeline will be paid.

Public education:

Government education is designed to be efficient, cost effective, and deliver information to as many people as possible. The programs, that different departments within the government complex have designed, help people that struggle follow through a modeled system so that they do not get left behind. Public education, Vocational rehabilitation, Job Corps, Americorps, and many other programs are designed around teaching each individual how to navigate everything thrown at them using the tools the nation builds and protects together.

The next section covers how to deliver information that communities need in order to thrive, utilizing behavioral therapy concepts and textbooks being taught currently at The University of Montana.

Utilizing The University of Montana

The University of Montana is an important staple in the community. The University employs, shapes, and supports the Missoula area in many ways. Each field of study is cutting edge and competitive with the changing environment. Professionals from the University often participate in educating the area about the information that changes through academic studies. It is important to note that not all studies compliment each other, and differing opinions are debated in court to resolve conflict. Scientific research is written to both prove and disprove theories about how the world works. When research differs the validity of the chosen perspective can be debated.

Behavioral therapy steps can help community leaders break down what needs to be done faster, in a more efficient way. Here are the steps, highlighted in the current text book The University of Montana uses to teach behavior therapy, and how they apply to the city's current direction:

1. Clarifying the problem.

The above example is that a large group of people are going to need to find somewhere else to live. They will need to stay within the laws and use the resources available to make new choices. Missoula has several different solutions. There are funds for people to get a bus ticket to a place that is set up with more of a boondocking environment, or to see family. There are apartments that can be rented with a roommate if they are maintaining their financial fitness. There are a small amount of beds in the existing shelter and urban camping is illegal within city limits.

2. Formulating Initial Treatment Goals

Goals need to be measurable and attainable or the population that needs to execute the behaviors will feel it is impossible. The goal of this population should be to find solutions and start working towards them.

3. Design Target Behavior

The behaviors that should be targeted to get people from the shelter onto a different path should be: taking steps to maintain their physical and mental health, saving money and learning to maintain bill pay. Many people within the shelters can work if given enough structure to get back into the work force. Most people within the shelters would like to make money under the table to avoid losing their benefits. Voc. Rehab. Can help them understand how to navigate working and keeping their benefits. The target behaviors should be measurable.

4. Identify Maintaining Conditions

Write an assessment of what helps people execute the desired behavior and what keeps a person from executing the behaviors. This can include environmental factors that cause anxiety, personal responses from trauma, and lack of access to information.

5. Design Treatment Plan

A plan to shape the behaviors of communities encompasses what tasks people are going to do to meet their goals. Tools can include a structure around their daily schedule that prompts them to execute tasks at different times to help them get from where they are to where they need to be. A treatment plan to address a group also would include how the behavior will be prompted and modeled to the community.

6. Implement Treatment Plan

Implementing the treatment plan requires timed responses and conditioning tactics. Information about needed behavior changes should permeate the area and places the population frequents. This may include targeted public outreach, online and through support social media pages.

7. Evaluate success of plan

How well was the behavior change plan accepted and used by the targeted community? What were the short falls? Was there an adequate structure of communication and prompts around the execution of new behaviors?

8. Conduct follow-up assessment

Was the execution of the goals successful, and seen positively by the people that needed to make behavioral changes? What helped the process? What harmed the process? (Spiegler)

Utilizing behavioral therapy to help understand how to create structure during transitions within the nation helps relieve pressure that builds up within a population during major changes. As a nation we see many changes and transitions that abruptly change what people need to do in order to thrive. There have been discussions around whether or not government offices using tactics to shape behavior is ethical. It is unethical to change the direction of a nation on the drop of a dime and expect people to come up solutions out of nowhere. In the next few paragraphs we will explore different ways that understanding the application of behavioral therapy can help public services shape and save lives.

Behavior therapy is a process of observing where someone is and where someone needs to go, then prompting and modeling structure for them to get there. Let's start with an example of a problem in Missoula and how this model can help the outcome be more productive. In March of 2025 the City of Missoula announced it is going to close the Johnson Street Warming Shelter in August. The shelter has over a hundred regular occupants that will need to have new solutions. In populations that have decreased daily behavior routines, a tiered approach is the most efficient to help people achieve goals. Here are the three approaches that can be utilized to help the community transition:

Visual prompts (exposure):

flyers, classes, regular public meetings announced visibly and frequently, utilize language on public outreach that makes it clear the behaviors and topics followed and supported by the entire community.

Modeled conversations (acquisition):

staff and other community support professionals repeat conversations in front of the population.

Peer support (acceptance):

staff, peers with experience, and support professionals engage in helping execute behavior. (Spiegler)

Practical Application Examples:

To help people accelerate and decelerate target behaviors, that are needed to navigate experiencing homelessness, information can be given on how to handle situations that arise. For example: what do you do when you experience adversity that leaves you unhoused? There are many different reasons people end up unhoused. It is a traumatizing experience on it's own. The models that are set down to help people navigate the stress around going through the experience can either accelerate behaviors into helpful choices, or unhelpful choices.

Reinforcements that are continuous or intermittent supports can be given within the information the town gives on topics. Most populations want the people leading to tell them how to use what functions to support the community. When problems arise people look to see that they are being resolved. If they are not being resolved the community needs to know what possible solutions they now have when navigating new obstacles that involve shared spaces and resources. Activities can be accessible within a community to help people have more potential reinforcers to help them redesign their path after adversity. Attending a club meeting, attending a concert, being alone, being with people, complimenting or praising someone, cooking, dancing, daydreaming, doing art work, doing volunteer work, driving, eating out, eating snacks, exercising, getting dressed up, getting or giving a massage or back rub, getting up early in the morning, going on vacation, going to a mall, going to a party, going to the movies, helping someone, listening to music, listening to or watching tv, listening to the radio, playing video games, playing sports, playing a musical instrument, playing with a pet, reading fiction, reading the newspaper, riding a bike, saying prayers, sending and receiving emails, shopping, sleeping late, staying up late, straightening up, surfing the internet, taking a nap, taking a shower, taking a walk, talking on the telephone, telling stories and jokes are all activities that people can integrate into their daily schedules to change their lives and shape the environment.

Identifying pleasant activities that the population will be able to lean into will address deficits that were created due to environmental factors, if the application of the use of the activity is successful. These activities, as well as the deficits, can be identified using direct questioning. Utilizing activities makes changing behaviors easier than teaching people to target behaviors directly. Targeting behaviors directly often requires a person to have most of their needs met. When someone does not have food, water, and shelter it is a lot harder to focus on specific behaviors. This is because the trauma of being in this type of environment continually shocks a person's system. When animals have their survival threatened in any way they use their herd instincts to survive. This means that they look to the people around them to understand how to not fall off of the proverbial cliff. Defining good target behaviors, whether you target the behaviors through direct behavior shifts or through activity, is important. Good target behaviors should be narrow in scope, unambiguously defined, measurable, appropriate and adaptive. (Privitera)

The human experience has a very intricate balance to it. Add too much of one dynamic and you get too much of another in a different direction. When people experience adversity their lives often require a different balance than before. The balance change could be to relieve an added required task, needing to bounce back after a financial emergency, or a medical issue that required a ton of extra energy and money to get through. Each thing that adds to a person's life will change the things they put around them. If you had a lot of time before you might use your free time to hang with friends, if you have less time and more stress you will probably use all of your free time taking care of things that stress you out and practicing relaxation techniques. After a financial emergency hanging with your friends may look like a big dent to the pocketbook. Which would leave you feeling less like being social. To understand the deficits and excesses it is important to understand why they exist and how they help. We often misunderstand that which we are not walking through.

As Missoula continues it's journey helping all of our wonderful community members redesign their lives and get plugged back into the community, let's all observe how amazing this community really is. Every single cultural group in the world lives and parties together here, and that is beautiful.

Work Cited:

Spiegler, Michael; Contemporary Behavior Therapy, sixth edition
Privitera, Gregory; Research Methods for the Behavioral Sciences, third edition