Identifying and Addressing

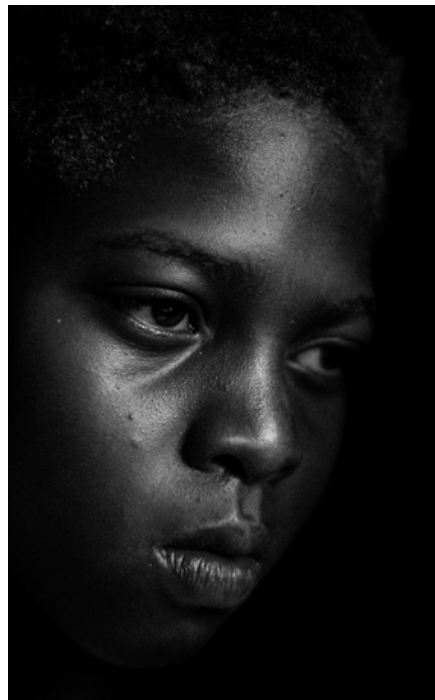# Racial Inequity in the Housing Crisis Response System

BY AMANDA ROSADO

In recent years, Florida's Continuums of Care (CoCs) increased their data collection and reporting efforts to increase transparency and help identify how funding can best improve outcomes for Florida's most vulnerable residents. While this development is a welcome and undeniable virtue, these improvements also revealed disturbing inequities in outcomes between racial groups for those served by CoCs. As professionals in the field recognize the reality of systemic inequities based on race, we must understand what the data tells us and how to respond.

What is racial equity? Racial equity is achieved when one's race is no longer a predictor of outcomes in healthcare, education, housing, and a host of other inequitable systems. It is a common misperception that poverty is the strongest predictor of homelessness. In fact, the Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC) report highlighted that homelessness is rooted in segregation and a history of discriminatory practices in housing, banking, and criminal justice systems. The implications of this study, coupled with understanding the role of systemic racism, challenge CoCs and housing providers to find more equitable approaches to providing housing and services. For example, emergency shelter or permanent supportive housing is not the problem - those are critical parts of the system - the problem is inequitable distribution of resources.

Black people experience homelessness at a higher rate compared to their White counterparts in every state in the country. In the United States, 40% of people experiencing homelessness are Black despite constituting only 13% of the general population. Similarly, American Indians/Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and people who identify as two or more races make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population. Florida is no exception, with Black persons comprising 40% of people experiencing homelessness despite accounting for only 16% of the general population. This data places a tremendous responsibility on the housing crisis response system to respond.

To help illustrate how the housing crisis response system can produce inequitable outcomes based on race, consider a typical scenario:

An emergency shelter reviews its history, policies, and practices for banning clients from shelter due to rule violations. After close examination, the shelter discovers that its overnight staff are primarily White and have historically been the people imposing most of the bans. Additionally, the review discovers that the bans are against Black people and people of color and are often for activities that do not represent a meaningful health or safety risk. Shelter staff may be banning an individual based on a perceived safety risk, not an actual safety risk due to implicit bias. This inequitable enforcement of rules leads to Black and people of color shelter guests sleeping on the street. Once they are sleeping outside, many face an elevated risk of interaction with law enforcement. Once an arrest is made, most persons experiencing homelessness cannot make bail and are at risk of losing any remaining safety net. Upon discharge from jail, they have an even greater challenge in securing employment

because of their recent arrest record and still have nowhere to live as the shelter refuses to admit them. Without any kind of support, housing seems an impossible feat.

This scenario may seem implausible or exaggerated, but it is not. This scenario is all too familiar and a reality for many people experiencing homelessness. The very systems developed to help people most in need, including the housing crisis response system, often discriminate and further perpetuate systemic racism.

Recognizing systemic inequity in the housing crisis response system and how it can be perpetuated by otherwise well-meaning professionals is a crucial first step. The second step is to implement methods for combatting racial inequity and work towards positive outcomes for all. To get started, we suggest you start with these five actions:

1. Disaggregate your data. Look at the number of people returning to homelessness, or who are prioritized for housing, disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

2. Educate yourself. The resources are endless to assist you, your organization, and your community about systemic racism and its impact on housing and homelessness.

3. Interrogate your data. Once you understand how systems work to produce inequitable outcomes, ask what your data can tell you and explore how inequities can be inadvertently produced in your own operation. Go beyond just pulling reports. Pull the reports, identify troubling trends, discuss the data with people with lived experience, and adjust accordingly.

4. Make better policies. When policies are made for and about people, make sure they are at the table and their input is valued. Acknowledge that policies can and should be improved and that you may need to bring others to the table.

5. Do the hard work. Keep at it. Keep organizing, educating, training, and adapting.

Addressing inequity in our policies and systems can seem daunting. Fortunately, the CARES Act produced an unprecedented amount of funding available for housing and homelessness. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Ben Carson and other HUD officials have clearly stated the money should be utilized to end homelessness. Deploying CARES Act funding will hopefully help Florida communities reduce homelessness, but it will mean continued inequity if we do not pursue an intentional effort to work toward racial equity. The housing crisis response system must ensure that preventing and ending homelessness is not only a priority, but that it is achieved through a racial equity lens.

Amanda Rosado is the Ending Homelessness Team Director at the Florida Housing Coalition and is a strong advocate for housing first and recovery-oriented systems of care. She is passionate about utilizing evidence-based practices and providing effective interventions to work with vulnerable populations. Amanda holds a Master's degree in Social Work from the University of South Carolina.