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Taking the homeless beyond shelters

Rosanne Haggerty's Common Ground creates permanent housing that has reduced homelessness by 87 percent in one 20-block area of New York City.

By Jina Moore | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

Rosanne Haggerty didn't intend to start a crusade against homelessness. Taking a year off before law school, or so she thought, to volunteer at a shelter for runaway youths in Times Square in 1983, she learned the lesson that became her calling.

"It [had] never occurred to me there was a missing piece between availability of housing [and] everything else they needed to be able to lead a purposeful life: a job, finishing their education, decent health," Ms. Haggerty says. "How could you begin to address that if people were wandering the streets or going from couch to couch?"

Few people saw homelessness that way 20 years ago. The common assumption was that the homeless were lazy or crazy, and the common solution was shelters and soup kitchens. Haggerty saw it differently: "I realized that for all of the [shelter] housing we were building in midtown [Manhattan], I was still seeing some of the same homeless people in Times Square I'd been seeing for years."

Shelters, she realized, weren't working. So when Haggerty set out to tackle a spot known in New York City as "homeless hell," she had to build a nonprofit – Common Ground – to support her vision. Common Ground's first project was the Times Square Hotel. Built as a men's hotel in 1922, it had become what Haggerty recalls as "a very public disaster" by the time she began her work in 1990. "It had been used as emergency housing for homeless families by the city of New York, and it was a scene of complete social chaos," she says. "The building had 1,700 building-code violations."

Haggerty set to work turning "homeless hell" into mixed-income housing that served two communities otherwise segregated by the usual "solutions": the chronically homeless and working individuals and families temporarily down on their luck. The approach, designed to create a community that promised more permanence than the shelter environment, reduced homelessness by 87 percent in the hotel's 20-block neighborhood. Today the Times Square Hotel, on the National Register of Historic Places, houses 652 low-income people, many of them formerly homeless.

Haggerty went on to reinvent another fallen symbol of old New York, the Prince George Hotel, converting its rooms into apartments, its lobby into an exhibition space, and its ornate ballroom into a hall for rent. Today, with the help of city loans, Common Ground has 2,000 rooms in six buildings across the city and plans to add 4,000 more rooms by 2015; it also houses on-site outreach centers, designed to break the

cycle of homelessness that pushes the most vulnerable between shelters, hospitals, and jails. That, too, is visionary in New York, where visiting scattered social-services offices requires shuffling across the city.

Haggerty's work has helped more than 4,000 people move back into permanent homes, with a vision that has earned her an Ashoka Fellowship and a MacArthur "genius" grant. Its cost effectiveness – a night in Common Ground care costs \$36, \$18 less than a bed in a shelter – has made it popular with other communities, and her mixed-income model has been adopted in Los Angeles; San Francisco; and Sydney, Australia. In 1998, when Prime Minister Tony Blair decided he wanted to retool Britain's approach to the homeless, his staff called Common Ground.

Though she traces the genesis of her work to that year off before law school when she first began to imagine how a permanent solution to homelessness should look, her inspiration reaches further back.

"I grew up in a constellation of extended family members ... in old hotels in Hartford," Haggerty says. "My parents were very devout Catholics, and they would take us ... to mass on Sunday, and then march us to one of the single-occupancy hotels where older or disabled people were living alone."

And her own son, who as a kid spent days on end in Times Square with her?

"He just graduated from college a year ago, and he now works for an agency that helps young people coming out of foster care find housing and jobs."

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