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**Tattered Suitcases and Threadbare Comforters**

On most mornings, between my transfer at Newark Broad Street, the subway, and my nearly half mile-long walk, I see at least fifteen to twenty homeless men and women. Like most who live or work in New York City, I do not give their loitering bodies much thought. As I breeze past them, I am more concerned with being on time for work and with avoiding bumping into other rushed commuters. On January 24, however, I was directly confronted with the suffering that I normally ignore. It got right in my face.

Daily, I take the local Queens Bound E train from Penn Station to the stop closest to my office. On the 24th, through some combination of train timing and slow walkers, my routine altered slightly. I got into a subway car that was close to the middle, rather than the front. As I leapt over the gap, a canned announcement notified me that the doors were about to close. Though I realized that the car I’d stepped into was crammed with garbage filled luggage, it was too late to turn around and make an exit.

**Two homeless men sprawled out** across the unforgivingly hard baby blue benches of the car. They were asleep. The men were surrounded by their belongings: tattered rolling suitcases, rusted shopping carts covered in crinkled tarps, lumpy and overstuffed black plastic garbage bags, threadbare comforters affixed with duct tape, and grocery bags through which the outlines of Chinese food containers and empty soda cans could be seen.

**I watched other commuters step onto the train**. Some of them looked annoyed. Some of them covered their noses. There was an undeniable stench. Most looked disturbed and sad as they eyed one another and shook their heads. People clambered around the junk to find a pole to grasp or an empty wall to lean against. Each person kept as much distance as possible between their body and those of the homeless strangers. As a human being, I knew that most of my fellow commuters would leave the train upset. As someone whose job it is to solicit funds for a social service agency, I feared that most would do little about the scene they had witnessed.

**Part of my work is to research and identify foundations and corporations that might give money to our agency, Catholic Charities**. New York City is filthy rich. The wealthy people who live here are exceedingly affluent. The banks and businesses that operate from our steel skyscrapers and opulently appointed glass buildings place our city’s economy among the world’s largest. One might think that a job asking New York City’s institutions for money would be easy. The endeavor, however, is made immensely challenging by the fact that there is a limited pool of private money available to the many human service organizations clambering for attention and funds.

I use online search tools that yield thousands of local foundations that list phrases like “poverty” or “low-income” or “homelessness” as priorities. The pages of results seem hopeful. From there, I whittle out the small fries, the generous ones who are already supporting us, and the ones that aren’t taking applications. I am left with a sad few. As I skim across their 990 tax forms, I observe the same pattern again and again. Most of the grants, and certainly the largest grants, are going to hospitals and universities. My colleagues are all too familiar with the statistic. Only [12% of charitable giving](https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=42) is for human services.

**The basic needs of New Yorkers are largely left untended.**Meanwhile, our government slogs its way through the bureaucratic and financial challenges of responding to a seemingly intractable crisis. The crisis is that we cannot affordably house our poor and working poor.  Exceedingly expensive market rates, the deregulation of rent stabilized apartments, and preferential rent policies created a lottery system in which, at last count, there were [90 affordable housing units](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/08/17/tenants-under-siege-inside-new-york-city-housing-crisis/) available for every 65,000 applicant households with incomes lower than $60,000. Low-income New Yorkers are excluded from renting or owning a home.

**Wages in New York City are not fair.** Even with the new $15/hour minimum wage, they are not keeping pace with the rising costs of housing. The working parents we help at Catholic Charities regularly ask themselves whether they should spend their last few dollars stocking a sparse refrigerator, or paying an overdue electric bill. The fact is that [half of all New Yorkers](https://www.dropbox.com/s/k3t7w19lz3rprqj/18UW_ALICE_Report_NY_Refresh_Lowres_9.6.18.pdf?dl=0) do not have the financial means to pay for enough food and proper shelter. Yet, one of the things that I have the most difficulty articulating to prospective funders is this: eviction and debt and homelessness and school drop-out do not occur due to laziness or irresponsibility. As Mathew Desmond writes in his book “Evicted”, these emergencies occur due to inevitability.

**At our agency, we help people who have started their lives out far behind the eight ball.** Among them, we observe significant levels of stress related to the poverty and crime by which they are surrounded. As [The Urban Institute](https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/povertys-toll-mental-health) explains, “the constant anxiety resulting from witnessing and experiencing trauma and violence in distressed neighborhoods, negotiating the sacrifices and trade-offs caused by food insecurity, living in unstable housing conditions, struggling to pay bills, and dealing with numerous other worries burn up cognitive capacity.”

When I review the forms and instructions needed to enroll for benefits like food stamps and housing lotteries, I, a relatively unburdened college graduate, feel a bit overwhelmed. A hallmark of Catholic Charities’ work is Case Management. Case Management often involves the completion and the submission of complicated paperwork through the proper channels.  Advocacy and follow-up are made to ensure that clients obtain the resources they need to make ends meet. My attempts to communicate the importance of the work, however, often falls on deaf ears. Many of the potential supporters I speak with want to hear about innovative projects and job training that moves people out of poverty. They do not want to award funds for our pushing of paper. In reality, though, this is the work that is allowing poor people to survive.

**Our city’s homeless shelters tally the lives most profoundly disrupted** by the ongoing housing crisis - [129,803](http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/)total in the last year. The number glares at us because it is large. It also glares at us because it is an underrepresentation of need. The problems of homelessness and poverty are intimidating. They are as complex as they are obvious.

[**Catholic Charities volunteers joined the city’s**](https://catholiccharitiesny.org/blog/count-canvass-listen-special-panel-discussion-nycs-homeless-join-us-hope-2019) Department of Homeless Services’ [Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE)](https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/outreach/hope.page) effort to count the street homeless. Starting at 10 pm on January 28th, around 2,000 people were deployed across all five boroughs to find and number the human beings who are spending the night in the freezing cold. Last year, they identified 3,675 unsheltered people. Not all were counted and they never will be. Many bodies are hidden within cracks and crevices of the concrete jungle that are too dark or too dangerous or too obscure to be reached.

**The bodies are well hidden because they do not want to be found.** Their struggling inhabitants know that the institutions and systems that will attempt to address their mental illnesses and addictions are failing. In 1955 there were 599 psychiatric beds per 100,000 New Yorkers.  In 2012 there were [28 per 100,000.](https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/backgrounders/bed-supply-need-per-capita.pdf) Between 2014 and 2018, psychiatric centers in New York City lost about [15 percent](https://nypost.com/2018/11/29/new-york-desperately-needs-more-mental-health-beds-not-less/) of their total adult beds. The city’s seriously mentally ill homeless population swelled by more than twenty percent. Our leaders responded by opening six new shelters dedicated to the mentally ill. Legislative efforts to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill were meant to be humane. Without essential community supports and alternative means of treatment in place, however, trouble has ensued. Today, a severely mentally ill person is more likely to be arrested and jailed than to receive the medical attention he or she needs.

**When I ride the subway, I am often shocked** out of reading a novel by the desperate boom of another rider’s begging and the rattle of coins. I cannot count the number of times a homeless person has shaken a change filled can or a cup in my face while asking for some money or a bit of food. I have heard so many homeless people narrate stories of already tenuous lives made unmanageable by an accident or an addiction. Each time I listen, I feel powerless. I know that even if I emptied out my entire bank account to fill the cups that gape in front of me, the unsettling systemic problems would remain. Often, rather than take action, I push sadness at the pain and poverty of others far away. I keep a safe distance. We all must do this to survive.

**On January 24th, however, I could no longer allow myself to dismiss the responsibility** that I felt to acknowledge hardship. I may not have a burgeoning wallet or a large platform from which to shout my opinions, but I do have a talent for writing. I sat down and I wrote. I wrote to ask readers, if they are at all moved by the too common scenes that I described or the statistics that I used to give credence to my experiences, to please use their assets and skills for good.

[Make a donation](https://catholiccharitiesnewyork.nationbuilder.com/donate). [Volunteer time](https://www.catholiccharitiesnyvolunteer.org/). Contact a member of Congress. Share this post.

**Don’t step off the train and ignore an urge to help**. Do a little something about the suffering that needs to be addressed.