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Dialogues that Dig Deeper: Surfacing the Multiple Faces of Homelessness in Grand Rapids, MI (Report Two)

Leah Marshall

Grand Valley State University, marshlea@mail.gvsu.edu

Annie Taccolini

Grand Valley State University, annietacc@gmail.com

Joshua Fields

Grand Valley State University, fieldsj@mail.gvsu.edu

Faith Boyd

Grand Valley State University, atkinsf@mail.gvsu.edu

Caleb Brinson

Grand Valley State University, brinsonc@mail.gvsu.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Leah Marshall, Annie Taccolini, Joshua Fields, Faith Boyd, Caleb Brinson, Jessica Tharnish, Adi Sahitoli, and Jeff Bradford



Dialogues that Dig Deeper: Surfacing the Multiple "Faces" of Homelessness in Grand Rapids, MI

A Report from GVSU's
"Dialogue, Integration, and Action"
(LIB 312-01)

Dialogue One
Deliberative Findings
March 24, 2016





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Project Chairs:

Professor Danielle Lake Hanna Swanson (TA)	Holly Kammell Liz Warners
Assistant Professor	Dégagé Ministries
241 Lake Ontario Hall	144 Division Ave S
Allendale, MI 49401	Grand Rapids, MI 49503
(616)826-6744	(616)454-1661
lakeda@gvsu.edu	holly@Dégagéministries.org

**Holly Kammell
Liz Warners**

Mission

This dialogue was designed to provide a space for Dégagé patrons, staff, and volunteers to share their stories, prioritize key values, and identify a broad range of possible interventions for housing and homelessness in Grand Rapids.

Vision

Collaboratively design, facilitate, summarize, and widely disseminate a community dialogue around issue(s) of homelessness and housing in Grand Rapids.

Values

- Motivate Community Involvement
- Bottom-up Dialogic Engagement
- Reciprocity and Mutuality
- Grand Rapids Resident, Dégagé Staff, & Student Empowerment
- Increased understanding of community members through empathetic listening





Project Introduction

This community dialogue was designed to identify current gaps in responses to homelessness in Grand Rapids as well as options for addressing those gaps. Given the feedback received, this report focuses on (1) mentorship programs similar to the aftercare program at Dégagé, (2) facilitated housing, and (3) ideas for fostering social connectedness.

Through primary and secondary research as well as an analysis of our dialogue, our team was able to identify key areas of need in the fight for consistent, stable housing. Below you will find an outline of those ideas, more theoretical research on the subject, and data on homelessness/home-finding in general.

The results will be shared with Dégagé, Seeds of Promise, nonprofit leaders, Grand Rapids businesses and openly published so any interested stakeholders can access the lessons learned.

Timeline

Date	Location	Activities
February 9 4:00-5:15 pm	Dégagé: 144 Division Ave S, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616) 454-1661	Tour and Narrative: Dégagé Mission & Overview of homelessness in GR
February 18 4:00-5:15 pm	MAKB2116, GVSU, Allendale Campus	Students' Dialogue Design
March 24 4:00-5:30 pm	Dégagé: 144 Division Ave S, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616) 454-1661	Community Dialogue 3-4 patrons, 4-5 staff
April 12 4:00-5:15 pm	MAK B2116, GVSU, Allendale Campus	Student presentations on findings from community dialogue & debrief
April 16	http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_undergrad/	Publish Report





Authors:

Leah Marshall, marshlea@mail.gvsu.edu - Team Leader

- Responsibilities = Lead group in discussion, facilitation, and responsibility.

Annie Taccolini, annietacc@gmail.com - Facilitator

- Responsibilities = Group communication via email. Beginning/organizing projects and reports online. Also, conflict resolution leader.

Joshua Fields, fieldsj@mail.gvsu.edu - Summarizer/Elaborator/Researcher

- Responsibilities = Mixed as needs arise

Faith Boyd, atkinsf@mail.gvsu.edu

Researcher/Worker/Facilitation Recorder and notetaker

- Responsibilities = record and take notes during the final dialogue session, and anything else the team needs

Caleb Brinson, brinsonc@mail.gvsu.edu - Facilitator/Technician

- Responsibilities = Facilitate dialogue session, and assist with anything related to technology and graphing

Jessica Tharnish, tharnisj@mail.gvsu.edu - Recorder

- Responsibilities = record any information said during meetings

Adi Sahitoli, albar8cer@gmail.com - Summarizer/ /Researcher/ Recorder

- Responsibilities- Record and take notes during final dialogue session, provide research, and summarize goals and research.

Jeff Bradford, bradfoje@mail.gvsu.edu - Encourager

- Responsibilities = ensure everyone listens to one another with equal care and encourage everyone to speak in their authentic voices





Report Findings:

Defining a Home:

First, we find it beneficial to note that ‘home’ was defined by our dialogue participants (students, patrons, and employees of Dégagé) as a place where they feel safe and comfortable to be themselves.

Affordable Housing:

Dialogue participants collectively noted that affordable housing does not exist for many low-income persons. Section 8 housing is available, but for those with no disabilities, the housing market in Grand Rapids is far too competitive.

Proposed solution: Petitions for more low-income, non-Section 8 housing

Dégagé as Home:

Patrons have a sense of home at Dégagé, therefore it is a naturally trying process to leave.

Proposed solutions:

1. *Increase Mentorship:* Given that mentorship programs have shown great success in aiding in the transition of patrons into permanent housing, we propose efforts to increase mentors and raise awareness will be particularly effective strategies for reintegration. For example, at this time, Dégagé has only one male mentor (after-care helper) to assist far too many individuals attempting the difficult transition.
2. *Increase Awareness:* There must also be greater awareness and understanding of the productivity of mentors. Without them, the number of persons who remain on the streets or end up back on the streets after failed attempts to re-integrate into permanent housing is much greater. Mentors are a key factor in increasing the number of persons successfully re-integrated.
3. *Consider House facilitators* as an additional half-step between living on the streets and permanent, independent housing. The implementation of a community house/cluster of homes where there are affordable rooms, apartments, or small homes available. Bring a facilitator or mentor specifically for that cluster to assist in the day-to-day needs of the participants as they transition.



Conclusion

From our previous research and our dialogue with patrons and staff at Dégagé we have found that the two main needs to be filled are mentorship for the transition process (particularly for those patrons who do not qualify for Section 8 housing or additional government aid), and intentional, structured, and facilitated community-building in the area where the housing is. These interventions could alleviate the sense of isolation common in individuals attempting to gain independence.

Additional Research:

General statistics from 2015:

- There are 86,189 homeless persons in Michigan.
- More than half of homeless persons in families are children.
- 69 percent of homeless Michigan families are single mothers with children.
- The average age of a homeless adult is 32.7 years old.
- The average age of a homeless child is 7.6 years old.

(Source: National Coalition for the Homeless

<http://www.thecampaigntoendhomelessness.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=PyAi7MFQO7o%3D&tabid=80&mid=429>)

In West Michigan (Region 4) there were nearly 20,000 individuals experiencing homelessness in 2014.

(Source: <https://lntvwood.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/2015-homeless-synop-4-24-15.pdf>)

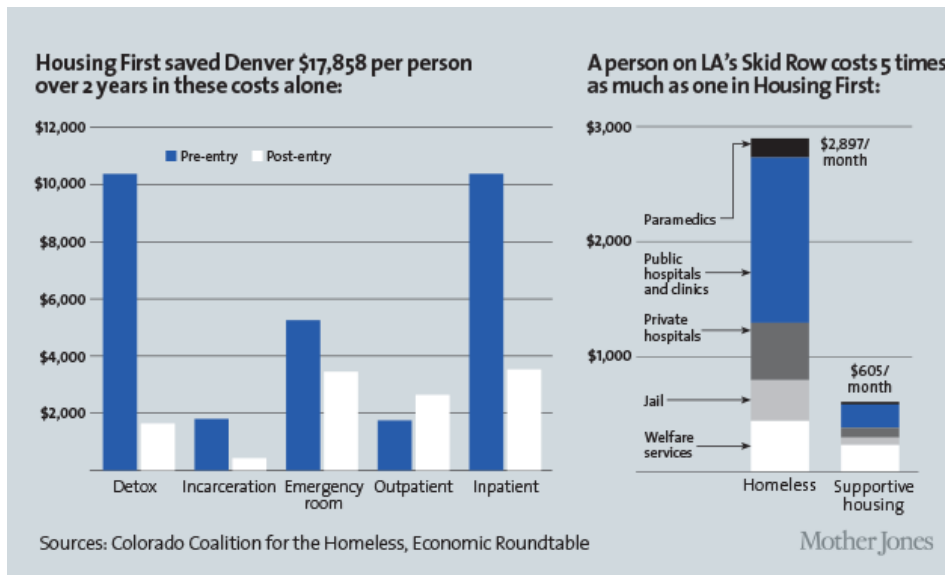
Further Issues Identified:

1. **Medical conditions:** conditions like diabetes are hard to manage with some types of food that are commonly served in shelters.
2. **Sexual Assault:** some patrons are victims of sexual assault which requires a greater level of training by staff for counseling purposes. This is just one of the many issues that makes finding qualified mentors so difficult.
3. **Trust:** Building trust in the staff and facilities is a major issue when encouraging potential patrons to use the services.
4. **Transportation:** Transportation is a barrier for many who are homeless, and increased options for assistance are desired.



Possible Opportunities and Solutions:

Supportive Assistance, no-cost housing programs like *Housing First* have been successful in various cities nationwide, saving the municipalities tens of thousands of dollars in emergency-care, law enforcement, sanitation, and other related costs of unattended homelessness.



Transitional Assistance for those gaining a permanent residence but losing their support community helps individuals maintain a sense of belonging and attachment to their friends and supporters. In-home checks provide psychological comfort, and 'pay it back' programs keep individuals connected to others, while fostering a sense of dignity and pride in their ability to return something of value to the community.