



Chapter Spotlight: New Mexico SSN Helps Combat Youth Homelessness

JUNE 13, 2023

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New Mexico has recently experienced a significant surge in its homeless population. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revealed [a staggering 48% increase in the number of unhoused New Mexico residents](#) this year. And the impact of this increase is felt intensely in Bernalillo County, where a large number of the homeless population consists of young people between the ages of 15 and 25.

Youth homelessness has long been a crisis in the state, and has garnered the attention of New Mexico SSN since its inception. Several of the chapter's members – [Cathleen Willging](#), [Kim Zamarin](#), [Rachel A. Sebastian](#), as well as chapter leader [Daniel Shattuck](#) – study health disparities for underserved populations in their state. All three recognized the pressing need to better support unhoused youth – and together, they set out to do just that.

Willging, Zamarin, Sebastian, and Shattuck all work at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) – an organization that helps researchers use their work to improve their communities. And when PIRE partnered with the University of New Mexico and a few other local civic organizations to help carry out a needs assessment on youth homelessness for the Albuquerque area, Willging jumped at the opportunity. “Cathleen was heavily involved in that process. And then she rallied a few of us to get involved as well,” Shattuck said. “There was a massive endeavor to survey young people across Albuquerque and in Burillo County. So I was chatting with youth, on street corners and in grocery stores.”

The [New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness](#), a nonprofit organization, approached Willging shortly after the [needs assessment report](#) came out. The organization was seeking support for their [Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program](#), an initiative funded by HUD that aims to reduce the number of youth impacted by homelessness.

“There's been a big push at the state level and local level, to figure out what to do about homelessness and be really effective at it,” Shattuck said. “In this case, the coalition needed data for their report, and they needed to assemble a youth advisory board.” Willging was happy to help, and encouraged the other three New Mexico SSN members to participate well.

The coalition held their Albuquerque Youth Homelessness Summit last month – which New Mexico SSN helped organize – as a way of putting together their youth advisory board. But things took a different, and perhaps more meaningful, turn. “It kind of morphed into, not so much coming up with a final product, but really helping the coalition understand the context of youth homelessness in Albuquerque in a much different way than reading the reports.”

Shattuck shared that initially only two young people showed up. Shattuck, along with a few other organizers, went into the neighborhood and chatted with youth on the street, and invited them into the space. And slowly, the number of youth attendees went up.



Daniel Shattuck

The coalition then allowed the youth attendees to shape the summit into what they needed it to be. “I had infographics printed out, we of course wanted to put together the Youth Advisory Board...and all of that just kind of went out the window,” Shattuck said. “The folks that we got were a lot more vulnerable than we were anticipating.”

And what they needed was to share their experiences, their needs, and their hopes. “I think it was really communicating to the coalition what the lived experience of young folks dealing with homelessness or housing insecurity is in the Albuquerque area,” Shattuck remarked. “That was really impactful for them to have those conversations with folks that they might not have been connected with otherwise.”

According to Maya Fern, the coalition's Youth Outreach Navigator, New Mexico SSN's involvement in the event was instrumental. “SSN's assistance in the planning and the commitment to attending was incredible and I really don't think we could have done it without them,” she said.

The coalition has already had follow-up events recently to establish the Youth Advisory Board, and several who attended the summit will be a part of it. Shattuck emphasized that as the name indicates, the Board will be absolutely youth driven. “They're kind of in charge. Even though there's a group of adults from several organizations working on the proposal and the application, the youth are the ones that drive what projects actually get put into the application, what projects they actually submit to be funded.”

As for what's next for New Mexico SSN's involvement, “Honestly, I want the Youth Advisory Board to decide that, to figure out what kind of involvement they want from SSN,” Shattuck said.

Learn more about the New Mexico chapter [here](#).