



[Image Description: A woman holds hands with two children while crossing a city street on a rainy day. The child on the right side of the woman wears a pink jacket with purple boots while the other child who walks on left side of the woman is slightly taller and wears a dark jacket, green shoes and a winter hat. Another adult crosses the street a few steps ahead of the others and carries an open umbrella. All four people have their backs to the camera and are wearing drawstring backpacks with the Winter Walk logo on them.]

Photos from Winter Walk 2020 were taken by Chris Shane, Evgenia Eliseeva, Stewart Ting Chong & Belinda Soncini.

Don't Walk By Episode 2

Release Date: January 31, 2021

Ari Barbanell: I want you to close your eyes. Think back to last winter. Imagine you're walking down a city street – maybe in Boston, maybe somewhere else. You make your way to the crosswalk and as you wait for the walk signal, you see someone out of the corner of your eye you believe doesn't have a place to go home to tonight.

What does that person look like? What are they wearing? What are they doing? Hold that image for a minute.

Okay. Clear that scene from your mind. Now, I want you to picture a child and their family.

[quiet, contemplative music comes in]

Take a moment to think back to the last time you saw a child and their family experiencing homelessness.

You're not alone if that image isn't coming up as clearly for you as the image of an adult experiencing homelessness.

Deborah Hughes: *...And families are the fastest growing segments of the homeless population, yet they are invisible.*

AB: This is Deborah Hughes. She's the CEO of Brookview House, a multi-service organization that works for justice, equity and systemic change for low-income women and children in Boston. And a long-time partner of Winter Walk.

[ambient noise comes in: outdoors, crowd gathers and voices chatter in the background]

Deborah first took the Winter Walk Stage on a windy day in February 2017. It was our very first walk, and we said we'd do it rain, snow or shine. And it snowed. It started as a beautiful dusting and soon turned to a heavy fall. *[music fades out]* The crowd stayed with us, knowing well our homeless brothers and sisters don't always have a choice of what weather they are outside in.

And as the snow came down, *[soft music comes in]* Deborah painted a compelling picture for an audience of hundreds on why families experiencing homelessness are not always so visible...

DH: *84% of homeless families are led by single women with children. Imagine a day like today in the cold, in the wet.*

AB: On past Winter Walk stages, guest speakers like Deborah take a few minutes to share their stories and their work. But a few minutes on stage only begins to scratch the surface when it comes to understanding the depth of the problem of homelessness. And when it comes to *families* experiencing homelessness, the need is great. *[music fades out]*

Boston is ranked third of all cities in the country with the highest number of homeless children and parents. And that is simply *unacceptable*.

We must do better. And as Deborah put it on that 2017 Winter Walk stage...

[soft music comes in]

DH: *We can do better. And we can do better by together investing in families. So, let's invest in families to end homelessness. [audience claps and cheers loudly] [ambient noise and music fade out]*

AB: I'm Ari Barbanell. And this is Don't Walk By.

[theme music comes in]

[montage begins - speakers share in quick succession: "We're now delivering five and a half tons of food supplies to our families. We're providing direct cash assistance to families so they can make ends meet" "I want to do things. So, now I'm doing it, so I feel good." "We're primarily women who live in the community. So, we live with the participants that we serve."] *[theme fades out]*

Family homelessness is one of the most challenging and pervasive areas of homelessness.

Massachusetts has the highest percentage increase in family homelessness in any state since 2007. And thousands more are living on the brink of homelessness.

Larry Seamans: *So, what we know is that there are 300,000 residents in the Commonwealth, many of them here in Boston, who are on the verge of becoming homeless because they're about to be evicted. We also know that some of those families are struggling on making ends meet. They don't have enough food and supplies to get by.*

AB: That's Larry Seamans. I've had the pleasure of working with Larry for a few years now, and that visualization we did at the top of the episode... yeah, I stole that from him. He's also the president of Family Aid Boston.

LS: *We're a hundred-and five-year-old organization that's been dedicated to ending homelessness for children and their parents. Over the last hundred years, we've been working with families to secure and sustain their housing and to help parents ensure that their children are building strong foundations for their future.*

AB: Like Brookview House, Family Aid believes in both preventative and emergency support for families at risk of becoming homeless and for those already in that situation.

LS: I think what we're seeing here at our agency is that families who are coming to us are kinda like the families who used to come to us. They're working families, they may be working two or three jobs trying to get by. And then something happens. Someone becomes ill... somebody loses some hours, right? That's the classic family profile of people who come seeking our support. And what we're finding now is that profile, the need, is even deeper and greater.

[soft piano music comes in]

So, we're working on a lot of different fronts. Now we're finding families who are coming to us who have lost their jobs who have to think, 'Do I work and leave my eight-year-old at home to do virtual learning? Or do I stay with my child and not work?' By and large, many of them coming us without enough food and supplies to get by.

AB: To address the growing needs of families, Family Aid Boston has deepened and expanded their services.

LS: So, we've done a couple of things. We're now delivering five and a half tons of food and supplies to our families, providing direct cash assistance to families so they can make ends meet. We're negotiating with their landlords to see if there's some way to mediate the growing amount of rent that our families owe. We know that landlords are just a couple of paychecks themselves away from losing their housing because they haven't been able to pay their mortgages. So, we've been trying to work with landlords to figure out a way to mediate everybody's needs because we don't need the landlords and their families to also become homeless.

AB: This need for a deeper and greater support is echoed by Deborah. And amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the existing systemic inequities have only been amplified.

DH: What we're seeing now is that the pandemic is decimating our community. There's hunger that is rampant. There is exorbitant unemployment. The majority of families are at risk of homelessness, they have to choose between paying the utility bills or paying rent or buying food.

[music fades out]

AB: Deborah highlights some of the primary causes of family homelessness: eviction, loss of income and high cost of rent. Other contributing factors include domestic violence, fear for a child safety and trauma. And once a family does become homeless. There are so many hurdles and so many barriers as one tries to get permanent housing.

***DH:** It's really difficult when you've been homeless for a long period of time. Because you've been moving from place to place, you don't have your social security cards. You don't have birth certificates... you're essentially invisible until you can re regroup and gather that information. And what Brookview does is we have case managers who assist folks in gathering all of that information and we will do whatever it takes.*

AB: Whatever it takes. And it's working.

[soft music comes in]

Take Barbara.

***Barbara:** Yeah, I was here for seven years... since December 13, 2013.*

AB: Seven years ago, Barbara found herself in an impossible situation. She had recently moved to Boston from Florida with her three kids and husband.

***Barbara:** So, we moved from Florida over here... 'cause my husband's mom, she was dying at the time. She had cancer. So, and she said that she had like a year left. So, we decide to move down here. We was staying with her at her house. We supposed to go back to Florida. But she was like, 'No, you guys cannot leave. You guys gotta stay.' But we was uncomfortable her house 'cause she got a little apartment.*

AB: A one-bedroom apartment. Imagine moving to a new city to care for a family member. You don't have established connections or resources here. You've left the life you know behind. And the reality is, your new living situation is not manageable or appropriate for your family. Six people in a one-bedroom apartment and one is an elderly person with terminal cancer. What do you do?

Barbara needed to find another option.

***Barbara:** And then that's when we decided to go to DTA and Dudley,*

AB: DTA is the Department of Transitional Assistance, a state department that offers programs for individuals and families to help them meet their basic needs.

***Barbara:** I didn't have experience at that moment about shelters and all that stuff. So, that's why I lost so many opportunity because I don't know what to do.*

AB: But when DTA couldn't help her, Barbara struggled to navigate the system on her own – being sent from place to place.

They denied me at first. So, they like, 'You cannot be here. Sorry.' From there they sent me to a hotel for seven days. So, seven days come. So, we had to go back to the DTA. So, that's when they put us in a shatter site.

[music fades out]

***Carolyn Mahler:** A scattered site is a type of shelter.*

AB: That's Carolyn Mahler.

***CM:** They're literally scattered throughout the neighborhoods in Boston. It's a private apartment that's rented and maintained by the shelter provider.*

AB: She's the Director of Family Shelter Services at Family Aid Boston.

I spoke with Carolyn to better understand the long process Barbara went through to get the services she and her family needed to stabilize.

***CM:** I think that navigating all of the public systems, the shelter system is big bureaucracy. And public benefit systems DTA and subsidized housing, different housing authorities... There's lots of paperwork, there's lots of waitlists, there's changing rules and so, people can get kind of caught up in that web. And it is confusing and overwhelming to families often. And if a family is new to the system, if they are new to the state, new to the country, if English isn't their first language, it's extra confusing.*

AB: And for Barbara and her family, all this instability and confusion had an impact, especially on her children

Barbara: *The kids they couldn't even have company, like that... their friends couldn't even come over. Nothing. My kids, they being bullied for that. So, they called them, "You homeless. You don't even got a place to live." My daughter she didn't finish school because of that.*

AB: Now before we move on to how Barbara got connected with the support services needed to become housed, it's important to note what's happening here: Barbara's kids are at risk of slipping into generational homelessness. Childhood is a critical point of intervention among families, where supportive services can help prevent the cycle of homelessness from repeating.

This is a long, challenging process. It takes time and it takes a toll on a family. Barbara and her family bounced around within the system for years.

[soft music comes in]

She's a determined person. And over those years developed a deep knowledge of the system. And eventually, she was placed in Brookview House.

By this time, Barbara was her own advocate, but also found the people she needed to help her navigate the system. Being introduced to Brookview allowed both her needs and the needs of her children to be met. Brookview offered centralized services that led her to get permanent housing.

Barbara: *So, 'cause we got kids we lucky that we got this opportunities here. And I'm proud of having my place. I wait for it. And I got it. And the kids are with me. That's... I'm proud of my family being together.*

AB: Barbara's story is part of Brookview House's incredible track record. 92% of mothers maintain permanent housing after leaving. And 88% of the children who participate in Brookview's youth development program, graduate high school, compared to the national average of only 25%.

And there's a few reasons for that impact.

[music fades out]

DH: *I think one of the things that's really important about Brookview house is Brookview is a Black and Latinx women led organization.*

AB: Here's Deborah Hughes again.

***DH:** We're primarily women who live in the community. So, we live with the participants that we serve. So, we know what the challenges are. We know they're going through. So, we are real, culturally responsive to their needs. And we know each culture is different. And our staff is diverse. We're multilingual. So, we— our approach is about presenting all information to folks in a way that is culturally responsive.*

AB: A 2017 report on family homelessness in Massachusetts by the Boston Foundation found that families struggling the most – both in getting out of shelter and staying out of the system – were bigger families and headed by a woman who is Black and or Latinx.

***DH:** Brookview provides programs for both women and children. So, we have a two-generation approach. So, we have adult services programs, such as clinical services, housing services. We also have permanent housing that's available to families and we also have youth development programs.*

AB: Through this two-generation approach housing support is complimented by skill building services and it's through these services that families are able to find stability and maintain it.

[percussive music comes in]

When I interviewed Barbara in back November, I asked her what housing has meant to her.

***Barbara:** A lot. Because now I can pay bills. I wanted to move. I want to pay my bills. I want to do things. So, now I'm doing that. So, I feel good.*

AB: She even surprised us with a speech she wrote to share her gratitude and her reflections on Winter Walk.

***Barbara:** So, I have something that I wrote. I want to read it first. And from there we can go. Okay.*

[reading] I believe that the Winter Walk is extremely important because as a former homeless person, I know what it is like to not have advocates and support. The Winter Walk is an amazing foundation because they raising

awareness on shelters and homelessness and have a whole day dedicated to raising money and awareness for the homeless.

If Winter Walk didn't exist, I feel a lot of people wouldn't know how many families are at the risk of being homeless. I feel that many of the family who are homeless wouldn't have the support and help that they need. The Winter Walk is extremely important not only to the fellow homeless family, but to the people who take the time out of their days to help and support this foundation.

I thank you Winter Walk for all the support and fundraising your guys do to help all of the less fortunate families around Boston. We need the Winter Walk. We need the support you provide. We need more people like you guys.

So, thank you.

[music fades out]

AB: For Barbara, paying her own bills means she has her independence again and the means to provide for herself and her family.

[theme music begins]

Something that inspires me about Barbara is how openly she tells her story. She's been able to keep her family together. She has housing. She's confident in herself, and she's also incredibly grateful to her network of support.

And we're grateful to her for sharing.

[theme music continues]

In next episode, we'll explore what homelessness can be like for a young person with their family and then later when they are on their own.

Don't Walk By is a podcast brought to you by Winter Walk Boston - an event and initiative raising awareness and funds towards an end to homelessness in Greater Boston.

Episodes are written and produced by Isabel Hibbard.

Audio production and sound design is by Kevin O'Connell.

This episode was made in partnership with Brookview House and Family Aid Boston.

You can learn more about any of the organizations mentioned in the episode and how you can help at winterwalkboston.org.

I'm Ari Barbanell, the Executive Director of Winter Walk and your host.

Thanks for listening.

[music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.