

Rosanne Haggerty:

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Matt Slepín:

Hi, this is Matt Slepín, and welcome to Leading Voices in Real Estate. Today's interview is a conversation with Rosanne Haggerty, who's the CEO of Community Solutions, a national nonprofit organization that's currently working in over 80 communities around the country, and growing to help achieve what Rosanne calls functional zero homelessness in these communities. Rosanne is one of the internationally recognized experts on homelessness, and in 2001 received a MacArthur Genius Award for this work. Back at the time of the Genius grant, she was creating and running supportive housing in New York. But over time, she realized that even though she was creating important housing units, the homelessness problem was still getting worse. So she created community solutions to address the problem more broadly, and MacArthur came back to her with a hundred million dollar grant to develop her methodology, a data-driven and process-driven approach applied to the unique setting of each local client community, and in which they've had measurable success in getting functional zero homelessness, proving that homelessness is indeed a solvable, not intractable problem.

Although we've discussed it on Leading Voices in the past, this is our first deep dive into homelessness as a topic. In some ways, this is a step removed from our usual Leading Voices real estate discussion, since homelessness few like equally a social societal issue rather than a real estate issue. But as both real estate professionals and as citizens, this is an issue that's topical for our industry. It's our industry that builds, or is not able to build housing supply that's definitely one of the drivers of this crisis, and the societal ripple effects of the unhoused as part of our urban fabric generally, as well as on the streetscapes of our buildings, affecting tenancy and property value is considerable. So this is a conversation important for our real estate community to listen to carefully. And the best part for me quite contrary to my beliefs going into the conversation, that this problem is, in Rosanne's words, solvable. Indeed in prepping for the interview, I listened to Rosanne's interview with Malcolm Gladwell on his podcast Solvable.

I just love that name, solvable, where she really drove home the point. So worth your finding that episode Unsolvable and taking a listen. Yes, in case you missed it, I was name dropping Malcolm Gladwell here since having her on the show, I am now once removed from Malcolm Gladwell. And that means twice removed from Paul Simon, who we also just interviewed. Cool, yes, Malcolm and I have put in my 10,000 hours on this podcast thing. Listeners to Leading Voices know that our guest list and conversations have covered the broad world of real estate with some deep dives and parts of the real estate business that I love, like prop tech, our businesses carbon footprint, New York, legends in the business, and topics around affordable housing. As we with Leading Voices, my company Terra Search Partners also covers the real estate industry broadly, but we do deep dive in some areas, especially the affordable housing business, which my colleagues, Becky Regan, Greg Melanson and Ally Sherman cover deeply. The impact of that work is part of the joy and pride for me of being in this business.

I always ask, but again, this is one of those episodes that I hope you will share with a friend, and this time, not just with real estate friends, but with your friends and family who can use insight on the topic of homelessness from this conversation with Rosanne. Please have them take a listen. And as

always, please review us on your podcast app. And if you have comments, questions, or guest suggestions, please me at matt@terraresearchpartners.com. I hope you enjoy the episode.

So Rosanne, welcome to Leading Voices in real estate, and thank you so much for joining us. If there was a topic relevant to the built environment that most stymies us in our industry, it's got to be homelessness. We talk about housing affordability crisis for low income people. We talk about the lack of housing supply, the lack of building all the time, but the place in the real estate business that gets stuck, and no one knows what to do, winds up being homelessness. So I want to talk about that. Our listening audience are largely real estate professionals. So the people are coming to this from the standpoint of real estate and understanding this conversation from that perspective, but not really understanding the social implications and the various pathways to success and how to unpack this issue, which is what we get to do today. So I'm thrilled to have you on the show, and maybe if you could do a brief self-introduction, then we can jump into it.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, Matt, thank you so much for the invitation to be here. And the organization I lead, Community Solutions works toward a lasting end to homelessness that leaves no one behind. And we have evolved over many years from being largely a housing developer and operator to working on the big system issue, which is how do we help communities pull all of their assets, information, resources together to get to the thing that we all want, which is fewer and fewer and ultimately no one experiencing homelessness in any community. The way we go about it is we now work with 98 counties or county regions across the country to help them organize all of the key actors, and their information to know everyone experiencing homelessness by name, and to move them through the process of being rehoused and also simultaneously to stop inflow into homelessness. So we recognized, I like to say housing is a verb. It's not simply a space or a product. The process of getting people, especially with vulnerabilities, housed and connected to the supports they need is an expertise that I think has been overlooked.

And it's key to overcoming the fragmentation of different programs and different efforts that have historically not added up to an end to homelessness. But we're seeing incredible progress. 44 of the communities in what's called the Built For Zero movement are now measurably reducing homelessness and 14 have ended homelessness for one or more populations. I'll just say a bit of about what ending homelessness can and does look like Matt, which is, it's really a public health type measure that we have evolved with these communities, which is helping them get to an endpoint called functional zero, which means that homelessness is rare, that communities have very robust, real-time data systems in place to flag new housing crises. And the system is built to quickly reconnect people with a stable home.

And so it's basically acknowledging that there will always be folks at risk of housing crises, but we can make that rarer and rarer, and not accept the idea that some people will tip into and remain homeless, that we can do better. And we have so many communities now that are leading the way and showing how, and I'll be describing I'm sure in the course of our conversation how that methodology works.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. It's interesting. One of the things you said, it's just interesting as you walked through all those comments. One, I wrote down a lot, but one was to know everybody by name. It sounds really interesting because you have to hit it at the macro level, but then you have to hit the micro level. What does it mean to know everyone by name and why do you say that?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Yeah, exactly that, that one of the great ahas here, and I think it'll resonate for your audience, because it just really is common sense, which is just as in a moment of a health crisis, you need an individual diagnosis. You need to have contextual information, you need that person's medical history to know actually how to respond, how to prevent something from happening in the future, given those vulnerabilities. Well, we are finding that the same holds true for housing crisis. That if you don't know the person or the family in their specificity, and if you don't have simultaneously the ability to see comprehensively across a community in real-time, what's going on with those who have fallen out of the housing market, who are at risk of losing their homes, then you are completely unable to organize your resources in a way to deliver solutions that will be effective at the individual level.

And simultaneously at the population level, it's like you're flying blind. And this has been the real breakthrough, Matt in working with all these communities to help them form a single team instead of many organizations, each doing their own worthy thing to really be organized as a community around the single aim of reducing and ending homelessness, of measuring in the same way, and of pulling their information in a privacy-protected way. Not unlike what happens in the healthcare system with, with HIPAA releases, but to pull the information of all of the different organizations working on homelessness so you have a comprehensive, real-time, a shared account, like a public health registry of who's actually experiencing the problem and that you're tracking as a community team in real-time, inflow, outflow, what are the disruptive events that are causing people to become a return to homelessness?

How is the housing placement system working and being consistently improved so that people can be moved out of homelessness and into secure housing quickly. And there are as many roots to that as there are different treatments for different medical conditions. It's all about the person, but you also need to be looking at the overall pattern and seeing is the community moving more of its resources toward prevention, and effective collaboration. And it's exciting to see that this process of really building a robust operating system is what has been missing in homelessness and that it's delivering results.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. So other words that you use, fragmentation and pulling information, and it's funny, my wife worked on a project in San Francisco that was to donate some sites, literally donate some sites for homeless housing and the different organizations fought over it so it could never happen, because the fragmented resources, fragmented organizations, fragmented business models from each organization got in each other's way. Then half of them were nonprofits, half of them were government agencies I'm guessing. And fragmentation is the overall thing, but it's going to be different in every city.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Yeah, absolutely. But that is the common pattern. And homelessness is an issue that exists at the intersection of many other issues. We have often said within our team and hearing from these amazing local leaders that we work with in all these communities that homelessness in some way is the measure of failures in other systems that it's not the problem. It's the symptom of the problem that is happening in court systems or eviction prevention resources or housing code enforcement or foster care or the mental health system or the healthcare system that the most vulnerable and the least supported people crash through these other systems into homelessness. And then somehow it's characterizes this other issue. But what has been missing in the face of that fragmentation is this very disciplined collaboration and accountability for results.

Matt Slepín:

Absolutely. So I want to get to Built For Zero, but I have a couple of kind of questions beforehand or positionings about the subject. When I was a kid, and I used to drive by Skid row in Philadelphia on the way to Camden where my grandparents lived, we'd go by Skid Row, whatever that means. And we would see the quote unquote bums on the street and we would lock our doors. Those were the words 40 years ago or 50 years ago. And then homelessness became a word. And then I did a podcast with Robin Hughes from Abode Communities about a year ago. And she said, "People experiencing homelessness, not homeless." So talk about, and one last comment, is I was with a relative a couple months ago and we were talking about this subject, and the relative used the bums word, versus the person or the people experiencing. And we discussed the whole difference and she stayed on the, "They're bums." Like, they're responsible for themselves. So help me with language and help me with emotions around all those different words I used.

Rosanne Haggerty:

You've raised such a critical issue, Matt, because I think the way over the last 40 years when modern homelessness has really emerged, there has been a lot of confusion about what is happening here. And I think the evidence is overwhelming that it's actually what you're seeing when you see people experiencing homelessness is the failure of a system, not the failure of an individual. And it's whether we can, in the government and not for profit and community sector organize our efforts to prevent vulnerable people from having this experience. That is really the question. And to frequently people who are in the midst of this trauma are blamed for their own problems. And the language issue is so significant for signaling what's happening. The idea that homelessness is an identity, as opposed to a traumatic experience is really something we should all ponder.

I think we can all agree that the experience of being without a home, being alone, being cold, being vulnerable being too often, the victim of violence, the impulse to be without concern for the systems that failed to correct for that. I don't know, it's troubling to me, but think you've phrased something very important and that we are very focused on, which is really pointing toward the system failures and that those are correctable and pointing away from the individual who is in a state of distress and vulnerability.

Matt Slepín:

And let me ask another question and it's kind of parallel, but in a different way, first of all, I heard you on the Malcolm Gladwell podcast. So I'm now, as a podcaster, thrilled to be once removed from Malcolm, because he's one of the podcast heroes here, but the podcast is called Solvable. So I want to mash up the word Solvable at the one end of the spectrum and the other end of the spectrum, Calcutta. And if the view is maybe Calcutta is inevitable as our country gets more difficult and devolves. So we think of permanent homelessness being just normal versus solvable. Comments to that?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, the evidence is that this is a solvable problem. We are making progress in, as I mentioned earlier, 44 of our 98 communities are now showing measurable reductions in homelessness. We have 62 that have gotten to this real-time data standard, which is the real sort of launching point for being able to solve a problem because you can finally see it in its full dynamic kind of dimensions. 14 communities have ended homelessness for one or more populations. So, the solvability is really not in question anymore. It's the how do we scale up the adoption of a set of practices that are really about holding

community teams and communities accountable for getting to that result? One of the things that's been interesting, Matt, and kind of tracks our own journey. We started off as housing developers and started off, I think in the place where most people feel like, oh, it's just about a more affordable housing, which for sure is needed everywhere.

But what we were seeing, and this was back in New York City, where we started our work, we were seeing that more and more affordable and supportive housing units were coming online and more and more people were experiencing homelessness. And so we were like, what is the disconnect here? And we saw that even in like this, this one area of the city where a number of our projects were concentrated, there were 17 different organizations all work on homelessness, and we never connected. And there were the same, in just this one 20 block area, the same roughly 18 people who had been experiencing homelessness there for about on average over seven years.

And yet, you have 17 organizations, 18 people over seven years. How can this be true? And so it was getting the organizations to realize that we had to share accountability for a result. And once that happened, we were able to dramatically reduce street homelessness and the whole experience of homelessness, we reduced it by 87% and were able to hold that through the process of this disciplined collaboration, holding each other accountable for an end state, and is showing that it was that intention on getting folks rehoused, holding each other accountable for the role each of our organizations could play in the process that really made the difference. And that's been the genesis really over many years of Built For Zero. But that process that to get the problem solved, there's still actually not the mindset or the shape of most communities approaches to homelessness.

It's not the way that funding for addressing homelessness flows into communities. It's still very fragmented. And so I think as we continue the conversation here and where solvability is a theme, we're going to keep coming back to this, how you overcome fragmentation. And whether you do it in a neighborhood, whether you do it in a city or a county or in a nation, this is the key, your incentives in terms of how money flows, how activity is directed, how groups work together, it has to be unified. And it has to be focused on the single aim of reducing homelessness, not how programs work, not how much money is spent. Those aren't the measures that need to be guiding our work as cities and as a country. It's how do we pull it all together to reduce homelessness at the population level, and to get each individual and family what they need as quickly as we can deliver it?

Matt Slepín:

So different question, but I'm wondering the ripple effect resources and money spent on this problem, because if the problem went away, I'm thinking the ripple effect money, particularly in the healthcare system and in the education system and every other system, those dollars go down and almost pay for the housing that we need and pay for the programs that we need. I'm making that up, but maybe it's true.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, one way to think about this, Matt, is what we know simply from published accounts. What cities report and what the federal government publishes with respect to what they're spending is that before the pandemic, more than 12 billion dollars was being spent annually on basic emergency responses to homelessness. And that's not even including within the healthcare system and all of these adjacent systems that you're referencing, all of which are stressed by having to contend with individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness. You do have to, I think, wrestle with the fact that what if it's not about the money? What if it's about our shared intentions and accountability for results? And I can say more as we go on in the conversation about what we've learned about what communities have

to have in place. But you've opened, I think an important set of questions about what are the financial implications of solving this very solvable problem? And not easy to solve, but very possible to solve on other systems.

And what I can say is in all of these communities, we work, conversations with public sector workforce reps in particular, whether it's EMTs, emergency room personnel, librarians, teachers, parks workers, police, they are all contending with this issue. And they're not built for this. And it's so demoralizing for folks in the public sector who are not able to focus on their principal job, because they're contending with people in enormous distress, and don't have the tools to help them. Whether the end state, when we see more communities actually organizing to solve homelessness, there are ripple effects in all of these other systems. And whether they're purely financial is probably only one question to be asking, I think the demoralization and distraction of workers who can't get their principal jobs done, because they're dealing with people in crisis all the time, it's something we should be considering as well.

Matt Slepín:

I'm thinking of cops, I'm thinking of emergency room people. If social work is the right word, but they're dealing with social issues, not health and certainly not prevention and not policing in crime.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Exactly. And it's part of this story of fragmentation.

Matt Slepín:

And if you have to chunk out the problem, I'm thinking there's multiple populations here and you work a lot with veterans. I'm thinking of veterans, I'm thinking of drug addicts. I'm thinking of people who just fell out of the housing system. I'm thinking of mental health. I don't know what the common elements between these are or the uncommon elements. So if you broke it into two or three or four different groups, are there headlines to those groups?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, I think across the whole range of those who have, or are experiencing homelessness, there tend to be, I'd say three things going on. And this is my own observation, but I've been at this a while. One is poverty. Two is very weak social connections with their families or friends, people available to step in to help in a crisis. And then there's the precipitating event, whether it's mental health crisis or an eviction or aging out of foster care or mustering out of the military without a clear direction or being released from jail. So I've seen that those three things seem to need to be in place that the triggering event in the life of someone with more financial resources and more social support is an event that can be weathered, but absent those things, it puts someone at a point of vulnerability for, for homelessness.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. I was at a presentation at Berkeley a couple months ago and they talked about the people who were vulnerable, who don't have any zero generational wealth. There's no safety net to save them from a bump in the road. How much is drugs involved with this addiction involved with this?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, the estimates, and we should come back to this question of quality data, Matt, but the estimates are that maybe, in the 30 to 40% range, people experiencing homelessness may have a behavioral health challenge, whether mental health or substance abuse. But I think it's important to know as well that most people across the country with behavioral health challenges are not homeless. So I think there's often a confusion that, oh, it's a mental health or a substance abuse problem, nothing to be done. Whereas actually, it's the homelessness that has to be addressed and people are far more likely, and just measurably do see enormous progress in recovery and stabilization once they're housed. And it's hard to imagine how anyone with a behavioral health challenge is going to see improvement without housing. And so this is a concept called Housing First, which is, get people into a stable living situation so that they are able to become connected with the supports they need to put their lives into a stable order.

Matt Slepín:

And expand a little bit on Housing First. And is there adequate housing to enable Housing First for this population? And how do we create that?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, you're getting to another important question, which is housing supply, which to have an effective Housing First initiative in your community, you do need to secure the housing units themselves. But Housing First as an approach is distinctive in that for many years, and in fact, there is still some skeptics out there who I wish would come on board with the evidence. But for many years, you saw within the field of homeless services and supportive housing skepticism that individuals could do well in permanent housing and living on their own and residents with their own lease. If they didn't first have their their substance abuse issues under control, or if they weren't stable and kind of managing well with mental health challenges. And we learned, and there's just extraordinary evidence gathered from housing first programs around the world, now that we had it all wrong back then, that you really have to start with helping someone get into a stable living situation, because only in that context can they really maintain the connection to mental health clinics, the support they need, the discipline that's re required to stay sober.

I mean, if you're experiencing homelessness, you're spending about 99% of your energy just trying to survive on the street and figure out where you're going to live or get assistance that day. And so Housing First is such an important and breakthrough and foundational concept in the work of ending homelessness, because without basics stability, none of the other things you need to make progress with your life are, are likely to stick.

Matt Slepín:

Absolutely. It's, it's interesting. Cause when I first became aware of this in the, in my professional life and I'd lived in Adams Morgan in DC in the early eighties, and there was a group called Jubilee, housing and Jubilee housing became the enterprise foundation. So huge stuff, but Jubilee's deal was you got to be safe, sober, not using drugs. And if you promise to do that, you can live here. And so you're saying that the evidence has moved in the opposite direction,

Rosanne Haggerty:

Correct? A lot of us, and I'll number myself among them, thought early on that it would be impossible for folks to succeed on their own without having done that kind of healing work first, we started changing

our policies and realized that the other was not just wrong, but it was cruel, to expect people somehow to become more stable on their own without the basic necessity of a home to ground them.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. I want to hear about your organization and how you do what you do, how you're supported to do what you do, because it's an expensive program. How you have the credibility for people to come in and buy this program. I know MacArthur has something to do with this, and just will say, you're the first guest who's been a MacArthur genius. You're not my first genius I suspect on the podcast, but the first MacArthur genius, but that probably also adds the credibility to go out and get organizations to buy the concept. But talk about how you built the organization that can then do this on a nationwide basis and where you're doing it and how you're doing it.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, I'll start with the present day and then maybe backtrack a bit to describe our evolution, but we are not for profit, working as I mentioned earlier in 98 counties or county regions across the country, really, it is an incredibly diverse array of communities, large, urban, rural, suburban, every political stripe. And to participate in our Built For Zero initiative, it's very much a coalition of the willing. A community has to opt in. A community as we kind of define it, the unit is typically an entity called the continuum of care, which is the HUD-designated entity that organizes resources around homelessness in that area. And generally it follows counties or multi-county boundaries. When you join Built For Zero, what community solutions our team does is to help the critical players, which we have found to be the continuum of care, which is the coalition of not for profits, the mayor or county executive, or both the VA, which has the resources for veterans experiencing homelessness and the housing authority or authorities. That group has to really understand selves as interdependent and the team.

That without without that kind of alignment, that's what reduces fragmentation. That's what allows you to pull together kind of an accountable and effective and measurably effective local response. So we'll help build that team around the shared aim of reducing homelessness and using the same measures to make progress. We will help that group work as an integrated team, rather than a disparate array of organizations toward the same goals. We will help that team put together that by name, real time data. And we have teamed up with the Tableau foundation to create really powerful tools for visualization and for tracking what the overall patterns are with respect to increases, decreases, and inflow and outflow, and what's going on so that everyone can out this shared data that everyone has helped to create and assure that it's comprehensive and accurate and current.

These community teams have the basic awareness they require to understand how this issue is playing out in real time, because without this sort of team approach, and without that kind of awareness of what's actually happening, communities were sort of just guessing what they needed. They were saying, it's got to be a housing supply problem. There's got to be mental health issues, or it's got to be about this or that without any real knowledge of what the drivers of homelessness in their communities over time, what was working, what additional resources were needed to solve specific parts of the problem. And so the Built for Zero methodology just makes all of this clear and actionable. And so our team provides the data analytics coaching, the quality and movement coaching, the facilitation guidance. And then also what is profoundly valuable I think for everyone involved, especially us, is having this network of incredible communities that have stepped up to forge the path to true lasting solutions on this issue. In having a network of these communities, everyone is learning faster.

Our team takes the lead in documenting what some of the tests of change are and what experiments to solve different parts of the problem, different communities are implementing and to

capture those insights so that other communities can adapt them. We're doing a lot more now on the policy and communications front to spread the insights and stories of what is working and even beyond the communities. So we've been called in the Stanford Social Innovation review a few years ago called a field catalyst, which is an interesting term. And as they defined, it really does describe us, which is we don't direct or control anyone. We've created kind of an operating system at many levels, which communities buy into. And in many ways, it's this just robust learning experience that is shared by all of these groups that have signed on to the same destination.

And we are supported, and we can provide this support to community largely because of some extraordinary partners. The MacArthur Foundation awarded us a \$100 million grant last year through their hundred and change competition, which is amazing. And that's a five year grant to scale up what we're doing and to get to even more proof points of communities solving this problem. But leading into that, over the last several years, a number of very committed partners who saw this problem of fragmentation and really believed that the issue was solvable if communities could see and work the problem differently, invested in us to provide this help to communities. And Kaiser Permanente has been an amazing partner, Rocket Mortgage. I mentioned Tableau, the Home Depot Foundation, the Ballmer Group. And so we just have had tremendous support from groups excited about shifting the response to homelessness to being about outcomes at the community level, not simply supporting good programs that we're reaching individuals, but not really changing the course of the issue at the community level.

Matt Slepín:

Wow. Now I have more questions, of course, but one is, is there a unified software database thing that people can apply in all cases? Or does everyone come up with their own software, just to get super into the nitty gritty?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, you've really hit on a key issue, Matt, because communities are not typically using software that is helping them reduce fragmentation and drive data-driven progress. Every community is mandated by HUD to use a software system. And there are a couple of vendors that supply it. That's essentially a billing system and kind of a program participation system, but it's really inadequate to provide the shared dynamic insights that communities need to get their arms around the problem. And so Tableau has developed this whole platform that sits on top of the data that communities have to collect in order to be in compliance with HUD funding.

I should also underscore not only do communities typically have inadequate and outdated often technology tools, but inadequate sort of not actionable data. And so that's why we get so obsessed with helping them get more useful technology on top of that, which they are having to pay for. We can provide, thanks to Tableau, these resources free to Built For Zero communities, but also the capacity building and the training in how to gather and use data that is going to drive reductions in homelessness, as opposed to kind of give kind of a general picture of what the number of people experiencing homelessness was one night in January, which is the standard that has been in place for a long time.

Matt Slepín:

I can only imagine that the wrong data systems create the wrong ways of thinking of it that then slots you into the behaviors that keep it not being solved systemically.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Absolutely right.

Matt Slepín:

And how much, when you get this group, I forget the word that you used, but when you get the group of the steering committee together in a community, are you with them? When do the training wheels come off? Do you have a person who sits with them for the first year, for the first two years? How deep is that, and then when can they fly on their own? That's the first question.

Rosanne Haggerty:

I'll use two examples. With, for instance, the city of San Diego, when they joined Built For Zero, their focus was on first ending veteran homelessness in the city. And we have historically proposed to communities that they start with one population to learn how to work in a different way, and then broaden that approach to all. And so with San Diego, it was with the continuum of care there, just supporting their work of pulling those key players together that I mentioned the mayor, the county, the housing authority, the VA, with our data coaches and our quality improvement coach beginning to train that frontline team, which is essentially, you need sort of the executive sponsorship of all of those entities, but the folks doing the work are the folks like the outreach workers, the shelter workers, the benefits workers, and to have folks from these different agencies being trained in a different way of working together.

So the first effort is pull that group together around the shared aim of measurably ending veteran homelessness, what those milestones will look like, getting everyone signed on to be accountable for that collective result, a lot of coaching for that team and how to function as a blended team. And then also with getting this Tableau system folks trained in how to, once they are collecting their by name, real time data, and being able to get to the quality data standard. And we've developed with our community partners, basically data standards for do you have at least 90% certainty that you're accounting for everyone, that you are able to update that data at least monthly, that you have the right protocols in place to capture and to report on different shifts in the data.

So there are about 20 questions. So getting that in place and getting the Tableau system up and running is one of the first phase activities. And so the first couple of months of participating in Built For Zero will be about getting to quality data. Now it will depend on often the size of the community, how long that takes mid-size communities. We see on average, about four months larger, more complex communities, it takes longer, but then communities move into a space of basically learning quality improvement as a practice to begin looking at their data and testing what are interventions that the community will develop? And they may draw on the menu of interventions that other communities have tested and used and adapt them locally. But they'll begin looking at what are the high leverage moves they can make to begin to measurably and sustainably reduce homelessness?

And with respect to veteran homelessness, in many communities, the challenge is how to get more landlords involved in accepting VA-supportive housing vouchers, how to optimize all of the resources of the VA, how to strengthen the connections with the local housing authority, how to increase the outreach activity to a stay in more consistent contact with veterans experiencing homelessness, how to make sure that, I'm focusing on San Diego here, which is why I'm highlighting veterans, how to best coordinate the role of case management and other services, employment services that those individuals need once housed in order to remain housed. So there are whole lots of different problems within the larger problem, but having this robust data and everybody seeing the same thing, you can get the

picture, Matt of how a community can put its resources together in ways that are actually solving the problem, rather than just treating this as this undifferentiated challenge.

And then I'll also use the example of a state in which we're working. In Maine, we have just, as of the beginning of this year, began working with groups at the statewide level, beginning in the largest cities, but working through public health districts to actually help all of the state and not for profit organizations get aligned in each district, having a team with a shared aim, getting to a point where they can function as a team and collect the information against quite widespread geographies on who's experiencing homelessness, make sure that all of the institutions that are interacting with those experiencing homelessness are contributing to this comprehensive picture. So that they're at the outside of this process of on a statewide level, not just within a community, but simultaneously I think it's for different public health districts beginning to organize themselves to work differently, to get to zero homelessness.

Matt Slepín:

It's fascinating. You're describing a methodology, a system, as I was planning for this conversation, I was saying, this is incredibly left-brained against an issue that's been very right-brained in the popular consciousness. And we all have a right brain reaction to this as we experience it as non-homeless people, but you have a very rational approach, and I can also, I'm thinking of, people want to donate, who do I donate to? Where do I donate? And it's interesting if I donate within the context of, I know there's this system going somewhere, I could donate to any piece of the system with context, I'm a context guy. So I can't do it otherwise.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Yeah. I think you're absolutely right, Matt, that there is so much a concern and desire for a solution here. And I think one of the big challenges that we have ahead of us is just really getting the message across that this truly is a solvable problem. And this is what the solution looks like. And you should be sort of demanding this kind of direction in your community. And you should be asking the organizations in your communities to please move toward this space of collaboration and accountability and support in terms of your volunteer hours, your financial donations, work that is adding up to fewer people experiencing homelessness. We really shouldn't be settling for anything less in the country.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. So let's come to those, maybe intractable places, and you're suggesting nothing's intractable, but it feels like when I drive through the Tenderloin in San Francisco, which I do often to get to the airport at six in the morning, and people are still up and they're sitting on the side of the road, or in Los Angeles or in New York. And I'm thinking of the part of the Wire, best TV show of all time, where they created Hamsterdam, where they said, we don't care. We're just going to let it happen. And it feels like the Skid Row of Los Angeles or the Tenderloin in San Francisco is the Hamsterdam. And you haven't mentioned you're not yet working maybe in any of those humongous challenges. Any comments on that?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, you're right, Matt, we are not working in those specific communities that really loom large in the consciousness of homelessness in the country. And as I mentioned, we would be happy to work with any community, but the community has to pull us in, that's where our legitimacy comes from. You've invited us, we're not imposing a way of working, but I will say that in the large cities where we're working, like DC, San Diego, I mentioned Detroit, Charlotte, Jacksonville, Baltimore. It is the same process, even

though the numbers are far larger, the number of organizations to coordinate is much greater, political environment can be more complex. We see that in larger context, you sometimes have to break the problem down into zones and you don't have just one table where the groups are coming together weekly or daily to do case conferencing. You have many tables perhaps. And the coordination is that much more demanding.

But it is the same process. And one of the other things I'd say about that type of coordination, and it may be the case in some, especially the coastal communities that the housing supply issues are far more severe, but communities don't even know what part of the problem is housing supply if they don't have their data together. And even in large cities that thought that they couldn't do a thing until they had all the affordable housing they needed. We've seen incredible progress by just being organized, by knowing what's true and how to prioritize and triage and direct resources. And especially in communities where the issue feels so overwhelming, the need for accountability, coordination, and good data is even greater because if you want to see change, you need to know what the actual dimensions of the problem are. And sadly, that's not the case still in many cities.

Matt Slepín:

If you don't start there, if you don't start with shining a bright light on it, organizing it, figuring it out, and then thinking of solutions, whether everyone's working together successfully or not, you got to get your arms around it. And you know how to do that.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Yeah. And I also say, given your audience here, Matt, it's interesting and troubling the degree to which the real estate community and the homelessness response community are two different communities. And the places that are making progress have really done a terrific job, and through their data and I think the power of the fact that they're really organized and are working in such disciplined ways, they've gotten more private landlords and developers involved in being part of the solution. And that is going to need to be the case everywhere, and breaking down this sort of odd separation between the housers and the homelessness response people is part of what is going to be required for a solution. And that's also true about breaking down the separations between the homelessness response people and the healthcare system, and the public health system. We really need a lot of support for moving these more integrated directions. And again, data has been a huge enabler because you can sort of see the problem in all of its dimensions, if you have a clear handle on what's happening.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. Well, and you also, it's not limited to housers and ha people in the housing sector from a real estate standpoint, I'm thinking of San Francisco downtown, housing is part A, in the most obvious part, but the less obvious, but just as important part are all of the landlords and owners, our urban fabric is not coming together well, it's being destroyed actually by this occurring alongside the work that people do in the industry. Workers come to work and they go, "I don't want to come to work anymore." And it becomes this. And when it's in the face of everybody in the population, then both commercial real estate owners, institutional real estate owners, but then just homeowners and everybody else. Society, we have to get together. But as an industry, we have a big role to play. But we need to change the subject. So Leading Voices is always the story of people's careers and how they got to where they got. So in the remaining time, the question for you is how did you get into this? And first maybe educational background a little bit. And then what brought you into this work?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, I grew up in the Hartford Connecticut area and went to Amherst College and then graduate school at Columbia where I got a real estate degree in the School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning, but that was all while I was working as a affordable housing developer in Brooklyn during my graduate school years. But the question about how I got into this work, it was really very spurred by an experience I had right after college. I volunteered in this year long volunteer program at a shelter for runaway and homeless young people in Times Square. And the deal was you live in our dormitory building here and work full-time with the young people and we'll cover your room and board and healthcare for a year. And it was at a time in the early 80s when homelessness was sort of emerging as a new issue, that it was affecting people in a much wider array of people than had ever been seen living on the streets before.

And I think the combination of this issue sort of being new and being in a situation where all of the problems we've been discussing during this conversation, Matt, were already present in this very well-intentioned organization, but that was running this emergency shelter. And the young people I was responsible for did not have emergency problems. They were poor, they didn't have families. These are not 30 day problems. And so I was really quite haunted by that year of feeling I'm glad this shelter is here to keep these young people off the street tonight, but we're sending them back out on the street without any kind of long-term answer, and we've got to be able to do something different here.

Matt Slepín:

And then, so how did you get into this as a career?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, I went from that experience at the shelter and at that point, my thought was I was going to take that one year detour to do something that was very service oriented before going on to graduate school. But I found the year so troubling, kind of morally challenging, that you could be doing good work and doing the wrong work. And I had this, the turmoil sort of settled in for me when I said, "Well, where do I feel the work is to be done given what I know, what I'm hearing from these young people." And yeah, I was just frankly, about their age. And they were asking themselves the same questions I was asking myself about, where will I live? What work will provide kind of meaning for my life?

And so I was like, well maybe I should look into affordable housing actually is created. And so many of the young people that I was dealing with were coming from the poor neighborhoods of New York City then, and at that time, it's all turned around given the New York real estate market now, but there were huge swatches of Brooklyn that were decimated. And so I had this thought and it gave me some peace that maybe spending a year or two learning about how to build affordable housing and making a contribution there would sort of answer this sense of I've been contributing to the problem, not solving the problem here and the kind of shelter situation. And so I got a job at Brooklyn Catholic Charities, which had an affordable housing development office and it covered Brooklyn and Queens and just wonderful leader of the team there.

And I just immediately got thrown into working on some projects that has just changed the course of my thinking about my mission. I worked on converting some vacant orphanage, and some vacant school buildings into some of the first permanent supportive housing projects that were created in New York. And that became, and remains an important movement in an important response to homelessness. As your listeners will know, the thing about housing development in real estate is it's an incredible liberal arts education in its own right. You're learning about history. You're learning about

design. You're learning about sociology and community relations and finance and project management and historic preservation. And so it was an incredible place to learn while doing then went back to graduate school while I was working, and then started my first not for profit organization, really specifically to take on this perceived disaster of a single occupancy hotel in Times Square that I felt really could be turned around and become sort of a model for permanent supportive housing as a mixed income model on a large scale.

And so I have just continued to build from one experience to the next, and that's been the course and I say with community solutions. So we spun that out of that first not for profit.

Matt Slepín:

Which was called common...

Rosanne Haggerty:

That was called Common Ground, and it's now called Breaking Ground. And so I led that organization for 20 years, but then I'd say about the 10 year mark, started really wrestling with this issue that I mentioned earlier, we're building an awful lot of housing specifically for people who've experienced homelessness as our other organizations. And yet the problem is increasing here in New York, what's going on? Who's got that ball, why aren't all of our efforts adding up to fewer people experiencing homelessness? And it was another moment of reckoning, frankly, which was, do I feel my mission here and my work is about running good programs and just building more housing? Or wasn't the original question how to end homelessness?

And so that really began the next chapter, which has been realized in community solutions, which is how to pull everything together so that no one is experiencing homelessness as a long-term proposition, and that we like other public health challenges. And I'm completely convinced that this is the mental model. This is a public health issue that like measles, as we come to see it, like traffic safety, we need to think about how to create environments and build our systems so that vulnerable people aren't harmed, that we put our energy into prevention, rapid detection and rapid resolution.

Matt Slepín:

I assume this is an evolution, but just talk about that shift from, I know how to build permanent supportive housing and building a project, this is real estate, we all know this stuff, to getting up to 50,000 feet from that five to 10,000 foot thing to say, "Hey, it's systemic. I'm going to go tackle the system." That's a whole different mindset. And then to come up with the solutions that you've described throughout this conversation is a leap in your brain. Any comments on how that leap came together?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well, I think first, it was just acknowledging the problem, that I was still walking by many of the same individuals who are living on the street, 3,000 units later as had been there like when I started the first not for profit. And that it wasn't supposed to be this way. And what weren't we thinking about? And at that point, probably about a year invested in trying to pull together other organizations in that neighborhood to work on the problem together. And it just became very clear that our different contracts, our different missions were all pulling us toward activity, but not a comprehensive solution. And that, again, that kind of wrestling with that reality was the prompt to hire someone to devote to pulling that collaboration together and taking responsibility for a clear, measurable goal at that point was to reduce homelessness in the Times Square area by two thirds in three years.

I realized I needed to hire someone who could bring a whole different kind of way of thinking to the work and actually had this flash of insight that I might need to hire someone from the military who was good at building teams and creating a new sense of a grand truth. And what's the clear mission. And found an amazing leader, a woman named Becky Margiotta who led that Street to Home initiative. And that was the proof point that this is a problem that can be solved, but it's actually about collaboration around a shared aim, not simply about more housing, it has to be both, the operating system plus the housing. And that over time is what led us to really kind of continuing to refine this approach and to share it with other cities led to our spinoff of that part of the work into community solutions. And then through a lot of learning and failing forward Matt, to realize how you actually kind of assemble all of the pieces in ways to reliably get reductions in homelessness.

Matt Slepín:

Right. It's interesting if we've learned anything through the pandemic, none of us ever heard of public health before this pandemic, and we never heard of the CDC. We did, but we didn't really, we didn't think about it. And what we've learned through the pandemic is systems thinking is essential, as essential as the ability to put a shot in someone's arm. That's describing exactly what you've done, and it doesn't exist in the world of homelessness. So you made that leap and it seems like it's working.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Well. It now does exist in the world of homelessness. We have these 98 communities that have adopted the model, and you put your finger on it earlier, where communities are saddled with the wrong technology, directed in ways that are not helpful in terms of what's the data that they need? And frankly, what is the role of different parts of a community in responding and preventing homelessness? And again, for your listeners, the role of property owners, developers, it's becoming much more clear in communities that actually have an organized team.

Matt Slepín:

Yeah. Couple last questions. This sound like a strange question, and I'm not sure how to ask it, but I'm thinking of the word bravery. And I'm thinking of the word bravery of a young student at Columbia who sees peers age-wise on the street and talks to them and helps them solve stuff. And maybe that's not such a leap because you're both 24 years old and you could do that. But I'm not brave and enough to talk to the guy on the street to tell you the truth. I see a homeless guy lying in the corner as I walk by. And I just don't know. I feel it. I don't just stop. I can't, and it takes some bravery to do that interaction, and you've done it through your career. And I don't know how much at the 50,000 foot level and how much you're at that five foot level. But talk about this just for a minute.

Rosanne Haggerty:

I think you can really only get to this 50,000 foot level, if you're also operating at the ground level and are really learning from those experiencing the problem. I'd say that's been the great lesson all along, Matt, which is, it was those young people at the shelter who really directed me to see that the institutional definition of the problem was incorrect. And when we started moving away from simply being housing developers and to start thinking about the system, it was going out on the street and talking to those individuals who had languish there for so many years and asking, we have buildings down the street, how come you aren't in them? And they're like, well, how would I even apply? Just realizing, oh my God, we're part of this broken system.

And I think, that actually might be a good note to end on, the importance of staying in touch with those living with the problem to get a true picture of what the challenges are. And once you can get a big problem down to an individual perspective, that's also where you find your sources of action. I'm volunteering here in my town to help them put a plan of action together to end chronic homelessness. And we're starting with 11 people who are known by every institution in town, and no one's accountable for them. So we'll start there. But I have every belief that we're going to end chronic homelessness here, but it's going to start with those 11 people and getting organizations working together to figure it out. They have activity in one of our built ERO communities. Like those are really good places to start making a difference. If you are a property owner or developer in one of these 98 places, we'd love to hear from you.

Matt Slepín:

Is there a list of those places when your website, so that our listeners can go to your website, find those 99 communities and figure out how to get involved somehow?

Rosanne Haggerty:

Absolutely. If you have a property or are active in one of these markets, we need your help because we've got terrific teams there, but too infrequently, the real estate sector is not as engaged as it could be. So please go to our website, community.solutions, and look for the list of participating communities in Built For Zero.

Matt Slepín:

That's wonderful. So young persons planning a career in the real estate business, what's your advice for them? This was you.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Yeah, I think back on my experience at Columbia, which was terrific. And at that point, I was doing a lot of very challenging and important projects in Brooklyn, and Queens, but they were 50 units or one was I think 90 units. And I was sitting in my program with folks who had ambitions to build whole cities, or huge developments. And I was like, it's sort of the same amount of work to be thinking at a much larger scale. And I'd say, think in terms of what's the dimension of the problem you're trying to solve, and push yourself to think at that large scale, but also appreciate that you're only going to get there with some experimental steps. I think learned the value of kind of quality improvement early on, which is test things at a small scale before you scale them up. But I guess the advice would be, especially if you're thinking about working in the affordable housing and supportive housing sector and on creating a wider array of housing options for people who have few resources, don't think small.

Matt Slepín:

Don't think small, totally agree with that. And you started small and then you got to this, again, we spent the entire conversation bouncing back between the granular and the biggest picture on solving issues. And it's just fascinating. You kind of have to understand and be able to do both, particularly if you get that top place, if you don't understand the granular part, it's not oriented. So this is great. Hey, thank you so much for being on the podcast. This has been a really great conversation. So thank you.

Rosanne Haggerty:

Matt, thank you.

Matt Slepín:

Thank you for listening into Leading Voices. And I hope that you enjoyed today's episode. I have a request. If you enjoyed the episode and found it to be valuable, please share it with a friend or two. If they're podcast wary, take their smartphone in your hand and subscribe for them and teach them to listen. You'll change their life. Seriously. Thanks for listening and keep in touch. You know you can reach me at matt@terrasearchpartners.com. See you next time.