

Faith in our dreams

Good Morning!

It is truly a wonderful day to see so many people gathered together who share our dream.

You and I, we dream that one-day every citizen not only in New Jersey but also in every town and every city of this great country will have a place to call home.

This morning I want to briefly review the history of the New Jersey Advocacy Network to End Homelessness and then discuss why this organization is important.

In addition, I will discuss why this unique and frightening point in time in our common experience is in fact the defining moment in our campaign to end homelessness in New Jersey.

Our movement began when we asked a simple question.

Would you spend a day in DC to help end homelessness in NJ?

The question was focused on determining if we could convince enough people to travel to Washington to hold a congressional reception.

Of course, we only began to plan the reception two weeks prior to the event.

What happens if you hold a reception and no one attends?

There was a real chance that we would not succeed. We began with the belief that twenty people might show up. It was a slightly anxious period of time.

Our answer arrived on July 11, 2007, when we held the 1st Annual Congressional Reception. More than one hundred (100) New Jersey constituents including the formerly homeless, passionate advocates and housing providers from across the state attended.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood our situation. He once said that "Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase."

I am not sure we saw any of the steps on the staircase.

But with faith in our dream that the time had arrived to speak openly and honestly about ending homelessness we succeeded on July 11th.

In fact, more than a reception was held on that day.

A statewide movement committed to ending homelessness was born.

But, if you call something the 1st Annual event, there is no choice but to hold a second one.

Thus almost a year ago at the end of January 2008, the four organizations that convened the July 11th reception – Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Trenton, the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness and Monarch Housing – reached out to other groups to broaden the movement.

On that warm January day, we added into our membership not only the Trenton Diocese but also the other four Catholic Charities, under the umbrella of Catholic Charities of NJ.

In addition, the Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry, the Lutheran Office of Social Ministries, The New Jersey Anti-Poverty Network, The New Jersey Alliance for the Homeless, the New Jersey Catholic Conference and the Supportive Housing Association joined with the original sponsors.

One of the first actions was to give this movement a name. The second was to form a Steering Committee of the member groups to provide leadership and direction.

With a name and more members the Advocacy Network to End Homelessness was ready for action.

On July 30, 2008, we held the 2nd Annual Congressional Reception. More than 200 people attended this time. We not only had both Senators in attendance but also a majority of the members of New Jersey's delegation in the House of Representatives.

But we knew that if we were going to meet our legislators once a year, we also needed to hold them accountable. Thus, on October 6, 2008, we issued the 1st Annual Congressional Report Card.

Almost immediately, several members of Congress responded and let us know that, in their opinion, we had not scored them correctly.

Sometimes criticism reminds us that we have indeed gotten their attention.

Building on that attention, the Advocacy Network submitted an op-ed originally entitled Catching the Attention of Congress to newspapers across NJ.

The op-ed discussed the impact of the Report Card and the importance of working with our members of congress to end homelessness.

As of this morning, eleven newspapers have published the op-ed.

In addition, the Advocacy Network was one of the primary groups that advocated for a state Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Last November the Governor signed an order establishing the Interagency Council to Prevent and Reduce Homelessness.

We will work with the council to develop a comprehensive plan to prevent and end homelessness.

In addition, if Governor Corzine is in the Statehouse today we will speak clearly and loudly with one voice – Governor, the only acceptable goal is to end homelessness. We will not accept a goal of merely reducing homelessness.

If we had stopped at that point we would still have had a successful first year.

But simultaneously two other activities on a state level helped to broaden the Advocacy Network's focus from solely being on federal issues.

A separate group, which included many of the core members as the Advocacy Network, had been working since December 2006 to secure passage of state legislation to establish county-based homeless trust fund. The legislation, after two years, had finally begun to move.

This legislation has now passed the Assembly and later this morning we will hear from Senator Redd about its progress in the State Senate and the steps we will need to take as an Advocacy Network to insure it is effectively implemented.

The second event that impacted our movement was a decision by the Alliance for the Homeless to join forces with the Advocacy Network. Andrea Krich, a member of both the Advocacy Network and the Alliance will provide more details on the Alliance's decision and their history following my comments.

Last September these events came together and the Advocacy Network expanded its mission to include not only a focus on federal issues but advocacy on a local, state and federal level for adequate funding and sound practices that will end homelessness.

In mid-September accepting the reality that if you do not exist in cyberspace you may not exist at all, we started our own website and newsletter.

Together we have achieved a great deal in our first year!

We are here today not to celebrate our achievements but to build for the future so we can achieve our dream of ending homelessness in New Jersey.

But before we discuss our policy and program agenda for this year, we need to answer two questions that cannot be avoided.

The first question is why have we formed a new organization?

Why could not one or more of the existing advocacy groups be the advocate for the homeless?

This question is crucial in these times of economic anxiety.

The organizations we work for have diminished resources and staff.

How can we ask groups and individuals to become involved with a new statewide group?

We understand that there are indeed other advocacy groups in New Jersey. We work with them and support their agendas just as we ask them to work with and support us.

That collaborative spirit is one of the many strengths of this great state.

But ending homelessness is no longer an impossible task.

It is something we can and must achieve. We have learned from each other and from extensive research studies what it takes to end homelessness.

There are proven strategies that work – prevention, housing first, rapid re-housing and supportive services.

These strategies are already being implemented in New Jersey by counties, cities and non-profits that have worked together to develop and implement local plans to end homelessness.

But to succeed, we need to not only to be able to work together, but we need to be able to speak with one voice on a local, state and federal level for adequate funding and sound practices that will end homelessness.

The Advocacy Network is that voice.

We need to be a separate organization so that that voice can be heard clearly.

Because you and I, we believe in a basic principle that no one should be homeless, we need that one voice to provide us with the faith and resolve to end homelessness.

Now we turn to the second question that is on many of our minds as much as we may seek to avoid it.

The economic crisis that we face today not only in our state and country but also around the globe has resulted in a dramatic increase in homelessness. Some economists have begun to refer to this as the second Great Depression.

The demand for food stamps, welfare and related assistance is at a record level.

The National Alliance issued a report that indicates there could be an additional 1.5 million homeless people over the next two years. On average that could be an increase of 75,000 homeless people for our state.

Despite the increased demand many non-profits have been forced to reduce staff.

Our state and local governments have budget deficits that seem unsolvable.

The federal government is expected to have a \$1.2 trillion dollar deficit this year.

Perhaps this is not a time to be advocating for adequate funding and sound practices that will end homelessness.

Perhaps we should be more modest.

Maybe we should be content only to ask for assistance to feed and shelter the homeless.

What should we do in this difficult time?

As a young man I learned a lesson about faith and values that has helped me to understand that we only have one answer to that question.

Forty years ago I worked as a community organizer for St. John the Evangelist Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. One of the pastors was the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus.

He passed away last Thursday.

When he died he was a Catholic priest and a leader of the neo-conservative movement.

When I worked with him he was, of course Lutheran and a firm believer in liberation theology.

He had walked arm and arm with Dr. King in Selma and Birmingham. He was the co-founder of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam.

He clearly had walked the walk.

The Church staff – including community organizers – was required to have two dinners a week together.

When Fr. Richard joined us he would engage us in discussions of philosophy and theology.

Being young and brash, I always attempted to argue the opposite of whatever position he supported. I did not know that he would one day be referred to as one of the great intellectuals and theologians of the 20th century.

He was writing one of his many books. The title was *In Defense of People: Ecology and the Seduction of Radicalism*.

He questioned if we could make the environment safe if we had not yet helped the poor, the hungry and the homeless. I argued we could do both.

He was well versed in his position: "We cannot be a good steward of the environment until we have fulfilled our responsibilities as a Good Samaritan."

He encouraged me to read Dr. King's interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Dr. King often used this parable to explain the social problems of fifty years ago. He spoke eloquently about how we should feel after we have helped the same person again and again.

"One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

That is not only a road to Jericho.

It is a road in Paterson and Pennsauken, Salem and Sussex counties, Atlantic City and Alpine, Newark and Newton and in every county and town in New Jersey.

It is time that we accept that the edifice that produces homelessness needs to be restructured.

Therefore, let me be clear.

This is not the time to be timid.

This is the time to be bold!

The Congress at the request of President Obama is crafting an economic recovery package. They are looking for shovel ready projects to help reboot our economy.

There is no more shovel ready project than rebuilding the edifice that creates and maintains homelessness.

Our friend Nan Roman from the National Alliance to End Homelessness has summed up the situation with clarity.

“It is imperative that we use the technologies and strategies that we employed to reduce homelessness to address this new wave. The response to recession-related homelessness must not simply be shelters and soup kitchens. Instead, we must employ the tools of prevention, rapid re-housing, and linkage to services that have been proven to work. There is still hope to end homelessness, but not if we flood our towns and cities with millions more homeless people.”

One of the policies we have advocated for is funding in the economic recovery plan for capital funding, rental vouchers and services to end homelessness.

This request is only one half of one percent of the total economic recovery plan. However, this new money could result in 5,618 new vouchers and \$55 million dollars in new services for New Jersey.

If we use this money to end homelessness we will not only save lives but save money.

We will, of course, account for every penny we spend.

We can and will have a positive return on this investment.

Therefore, we need to be bold despite the odds if we are going to end homelessness.

In closing I am reminded again of Dr. King, who would have been 80 years old tomorrow.

I am confident if he were alive he would be leading the movement to end homelessness.

In 1963 in his *Strength to Love* speech, he may very well have been speaking to us about the challenges that lie ahead of us and why we must be bold and not timid.

“The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk their position, their prestige and even their life for the welfare of others.”

Let us therefore be bold enough in this time of challenge and controversy to risk our position and prestige for the welfare of our friends and neighbors who are homeless.

Let us have the faith to take the first step, even when we don't see the whole staircase.

Let us, you and I, be bold enough to end homelessness.

For you and I know we must never be satisfied until no one is homeless in New Jersey.