

Taking care of the mental health of leaders who help the homeless

By Eric West, junior at University Academy

Homelessness is a significant issue throughout the world. We all hope and pray for unhoused people to find a stable place to live and to get over any issue they are having. This is hopeful—it shows that people care about this issue and unhoused people, but I want to hit on our community leaders who help them throughout Kansas City.



Has anyone considered how these community leaders feel or their mental health? These community leaders go day after day dealing with multiple difficult situations for a variety of people. Do we take the time to consider how these community leaders get through their life helping both unhoused families and their own families? Dealing with another family is difficult in general, but some of us jump to conclusions and think that these community leaders who are helping these unhoused people are supposed to help. “It’s their job”, “they signed up for this”, “if they don’t want to do it anymore why don’t they just quit”, are common replies because we as a whole do not want to help them ourselves.

We have to actually see that the community leaders who are contributing to the community are vital to our society. They’re doing this because they want to help. Just hoping for change wasn’t enough for them, so they made the extra effort to build these non-profits, mental health centers, and wellness centers. Wanting to take an extra step in life to help multiple other people and families takes a strong, well rounded, kind person, as well as strong mental health to get through all of these adversities.

Through my school, I’ve participated in a civics education initiative with American Public Square and during one of the sessions I talked to many committed community leaders, but one leader, Jill Smith, stood out to me. She is a community leader at an outdoor soup kitchen who helps cater the food for the unhoused people. When she was talking to my group, she kept a smile on her face and seemed really happy to talk about helping the unhoused, but when I found out that she was unhoused herself previously, I became curious. I kept thinking, “how does she keep her mental health together throughout everything she does, when she has been through it herself. Does it bring back memories?

Does she have mental health problems?” I didn’t get to ask her, but I imagine her answer would have been because she loves it and doesn’t want to see people in that position.

Therefore, I feel like something needs to be done about that to take stress off these community leaders and their mental health. That’s where the government comes into play; the government needs to start building places where unhoused people can live stably and safely. If we do that, we can take more stress off our community leaders. Of course, our community leaders will continue to help because they want to contribute, but the government providing more stable housing could help reduce stress and enable individuals to focus on their well-being as well as community engagement. As of right now, Kansas City has the highest percentage of people experiencing chronic homelessness, standing at 95.7%. That is outrageous, and for these community leaders to try and build many different services to help lower that percentage, they deserve props and love. So, if you ever have any opportunity to have a conversation with these amazing community leaders, thank them. Not for helping you, but for being strong and helping your community.

Eric West is a junior at University Academy. He is part of the American Public Square 2024-25 Civics Education Initiative. He and his Student Ambassador cohort are hosting a program, “Homelessness: A Neglected Epidemic” on April 10 at Rockhurst University. To learn more or register for this student-produced program, visit americanpublicsquare.org/event/homelessness.

