

Title: How Can We Help Solve Homelessness in Arizona?

Subtitle: A younger generation of advocates and activists weigh in

This week, we asked young advocates and activists in the community about why homelessness is a significant issue in Arizona and how they help tackle it.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness as people living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, in or exiting an institution where they temporarily resided. On the other hand, homelessness also refers to individuals or families living in the housing below the minimum standard or lacking secure tenure.

The Human Services Campus helps combat homelessness through several branches of its programming, including housing, shelter, medical and mental health assistance, dining room, employment assistance, and identification and post office services.

But tackling homelessness can be a complicated, complex issue to solve, and many of us ask the question, “How can I help solve it?” and “ Why are short-term solutions important in creating practical long-term effects? While there is no easy answer, hearing the insight of community members who have worked with the most vulnerable in Arizona may provide helpful insight.

This week, we interviewed Aria Saisslin, a student at Arizona State University in her early 20s. Saisslin is currently a sophomore majoring in communication, minoring in sales and marketing, and obtaining a cross-sector leadership certification.

(Photo Here)



Aria Saisslin

Arizona State University Student

Q: How did you get involved with the social issue of homelessness?

A: I grew up in Seattle, and homelessness was always around my entire childhood. Growing up, it still broke my heart because I never understood why people lived on the street. As I grew up, I realized that there are many issues that contribute to homelessness, and most of the time, those things are circumstances the individual cannot control.

In my senior year of high school, I wrote a 20 page paper on sports entertainment operations research. Specifically, I did it on how the Seattle Sounders, an MLS team, helped combat the homeless situation in Seattle by working with Fred Meyer and the Seattle Union Gospel Mission. I called this a big trifecta, and my current mission revolves around trying to raise awareness for social issues that do not have as much media attention as they should.

Q: Why is the homelessness crisis vital to you?

A: Homelessness is an issue we always see, but nobody ever addresses it. We often hear people call individuals experiencing homelessness disgusting. For example, one of my freshman professors has called homeless people a nuisance to society, which bothered me because one does not know their circumstances or their situations or where they come from. That could be you. Homelessness could result from a natural disaster, financial crisis, relationship stress, and many root causes.

I come from a place where I try not to judge because I know it is so stressful. My brother almost experienced homelessness because he's an addict. There are many contributing to homelessness, and I believe it's essential to address every root cause.

Q: How has the pandemic affected your perspective on the issue?

A: This pandemic has shown us that we can kind of do whatever if we have the money. Like in Seattle, all of these businesses are now doing outdoor restaurant eating because that's what they have to do. And in my mind, I am wondering where this initiative and drive are for addressing homelessness? Where was this effort to get together for these individuals when the cold months kick in, and it rains non stop?

Some so many homeless people don't even get the opportunity to get a nap, and the ongoing social issues are swept under the rug. Homelessness addresses additional problems such as sex trafficking, human trafficking, mental health, and PTSD, which most go undetected. There are so many different subcategories, and to address homelessness, I feel like we need to address the people.

Q: What is your stance on adding shelter beds to the HSC?

A: I think there should be more shelter beds, and I feel like that's something that the government should utilize to fund it. Like, they're there to help us and support us, so why aren't you supporting us and helping us?

Q: What is something you would tell others who oppose the request of adding more shelter beds to the HSC?

A: I would ask everyone to consider how does this issue affects you personally? I would also advise them to consider political affiliation and any political difference, and why does it affect you so much that you have to say no?

Some common misconceptions I hear about homelessness include that these individuals and families asked for it. They aren't trying to utilize their resources, and that's the life they've given up. Why do we have to stereotype that kind of a situation negatively? I come from the side of wanting love and to give love to see other people just hate or shame or look down on them. It's just unfortunate.

Q: What are some essential steps that can be taken to address the issue of homelessness in Arizona?

A: Honestly, this is something that I struggle with because I don't know. My ultimate career goal is to work in the professional sports industry and their community outreach department. I can start bringing social awareness to issues in a political atmosphere, but in a sports environment, because they influence kids and adults and the way they think. And unfortunately, it just comes down to money, which I hate.

In my fellowship, I am learning that cross-sector leadership is a helpful tool to have when handling these kinds of social issues. You need the government's help, you need nonprofit help, and you need business help because they all work intertwined together beautifully in a way that can help advocate for all of these social issues and put an end to a lot of these complex problems.