

How we speak matters. People aren't homeless — they experience homelessness

Kate Duggan

Special to the USA TODAY Network

October 4, 2023

When I speak about my work as executive director of Family Promise of Bergen County and our mission to provide temporary shelter and support to working families experiencing homelessness, people often look puzzled by the words “experiencing homelessness.” And they ask why I don’t just say “homeless families.”



Here’s why. We at Family Promise see too much potential in the families we serve to allow them to be defined by their housing status. These are families first — families with children, families who are working, families with hopes and dreams. Soren Kierkegaard said, “If you name me, you negate me. By giving me a name, a label, you negate all the other things I could possibly

be.” Hence, we see each family as a family first — a family in a difficult situation.

When a speaker refers to “the homeless,” the listener often conjures up a picture of a single man — perhaps dirty and disheveled — living on the streets and begging for money at a stoplight. They seldom think of children, teens — whole families.

Lumping anyone under the category of homeless tends to make us forget that many parents and their young children actually become homeless. Of the 6,631 homeless households counted in New Jersey in 2022, almost 1,000 (15%) were families with at least one child under the age of 18.



And if we do think of families with children being homeless, we often mistakenly minimize their condition by comparing it with the “real homeless” — the ones we picture in our heads. We must remember that all homelessness is difficult and traumatizing.

Even terms like “unhoused” and “housing insecure,” which might seem to be more sensitive and accurate, still unduly emphasize the housing aspect of homelessness. But we have found that homelessness is a complex issue with many causes. I have seen signs in government offices: “Housing ends homelessness.” I disagree. Merely putting a roof over someone’s head is not going to help the person raise their income, obtain additional training or

education, address health issues (including mental health), learn how to manage their money, or support their efforts to find affordable child care and transportation — issues that need to be addressed before a family is truly stable.

At Family Promise, we address the root causes of homelessness in order to end it once and for all.

Because of the negative connotation that being homeless carries, many schools and social agencies charged with assisting families experiencing homelessness have begun using phrases such as “families in transition” and “McKinney Vento families” (named after a state program enacted to aid students experiencing homelessness). This kind of identification of parents and children makes them more willing to self-identify. It also makes it more likely parents will take the opportunity to receive the services designed to help their family through this challenging period.

So let’s agree that families experience homelessness. It is not who they are. Once we all begin seeing them as families first, we will begin to break down the stigma that surrounds becoming homeless, and begin to chip away at the negative stereotypes that accompany a situation in which, frankly, any of us could find ourselves.

The next time you hear someone call another person “homeless,” please suggest they change their description to a person or family “experiencing homeless.”

Thanks for remembering that words matter, and labels limit.

Kate Duggan is executive director of Family Promise of Bergen County.