



Episode 15 – “Building Stability: Family Promise’s Collaborative Approach” Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Welcome to our podcast. I will be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I'm your host, Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities.

Matt Butensky:

And I'm your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. I'm happy to be back again for another podcast episode. It's been a few episodes that Melissa's been hosting the podcast.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Riding solo.

Matt Butensky:

I'm so happy to join back again for our episode today of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. And we want to welcome Matt Wagner from Family Promise to the podcast. Welcome, Matt. How's your summer going?

Matthew Wagner:

Welcome. It's been great. Hot, but great.

Matt Butensky:

It has been a hot summer here in Pennsylvania. Yes. So, we're so happy to have you and learn more about Family Promise and the great work that you do, because as you know, we're trying to elevate stories of homelessness here in Pennsylvania. And so, we are so happy to have you here.

Matthew Wagner:

Happy to be here.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah. Speaking on our conversation over to the room where we record our podcast, I had asked Matt, did you walk here or did you drive? And he said, "It's a little too hot for walking." But just to give our audience some context, Family Promise is actually in walking distance to where we're at the Center for Schools and Communities, but we haven't really been to each other's properties before, so.

Matthew Wagner:

Matt was saying [inaudible 00:01:36] project at our facility a few years back.

Matt Butensky:

Not true, the Center did a project for Martin Luther King Day a few years ago where we helped renovate-

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Before my time.

Matt Butensky:

... one of their spaces.

Matthew Wagner:

And you all are welcome anytime.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, awesome. And I just checked with Matt, the chalkboard wall is still there.

Matthew Wagner:

Still there.

Matt Butensky:

It still lives all these years later, so I'll have to go back and check out the chalkboard wall. But yeah, so yeah, we're very nearby. Right here in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. So, it's nice to have a neighbor and friend for the podcast today.

Matthew Wagner:

Absolutely.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

And being in person, we don't get that very often.

Matt Butensky:

We usually have our guests virtually, so it's nice to have you here in person.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

So, awesome. So, thank you for being here. We're excited to learn more about Family Promise. So, can you tell our audience just about your role at Family Promise and the mission and vision behind the organization?

Matthew Wagner:

Yeah, so Family Promise is one of about 200 affiliates across the country, but each affiliate is independent. We each have our own board of directors. We're each responsible for our own fundraising and our own budget. And the great thing about that is that every Family Promise is able to adopt its programming to the needs in their own community. Because let's face it, families experiencing homelessness, that looks different here in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, than it does in Rochester, New York, than it does in Topeka, Kansas, than it does in California. So, each affiliate is able to look at the resources and the needs in their area, and adapt its programming accordingly.

So for us, we got started in 2011, and our focus was on providing shelter for families with children who were experiencing homelessness. We knew that most of the shelters in the area were either for men, or for women and children, and the line of delineation for that was the age of 14. So if you were a parent, if you were a single mom, and you had a 14-year-old son, you would potentially be at two different places if you were experiencing homelessness. If you were a married couple, an engaged couple, a dating couple, and you wanted to be together, you would have to be at two different places potentially.

So, we felt like when you're going through one of the worst moments of your life, it's important to be able to be together. So the way we did that, we have our day center, which as you said is located here in Camp Hill, and that's where the families will spend their day working on their goals. That can be anything from finding a job to arranging child care, figuring out transportation, all the things that they're going to need to do to be able to sustain housing once they find it. And then, we have a network of churches in the area that will give the families a

place to stay for the night. So, they have volunteers that will come pick the families up in the van. We have a 14 passenger van. They'll take the families to the church, they'll spend the night there, they'll have dinner there, and then we give them air mattresses and sheets and blankets. They'll spend the night there and come back to the day center the next day while they're with us. So, that's how we got started as a shelter.

And then a few years ago, we really started expanding our programming because we wanted to look at helping others outside of just those in our shelter, helping people avoid even having to be in our shelter. So, it started with a partnership with the United Way of the Capital Region. They have a program called Road to Success, which is designed to eliminate the barriers to jobs that pay a family sustaining wage. So, they have funds for things like child care, uniforms, work clothes, transportation, all of that stuff. So, we're one of the case management sites for that program. We'll do the intake, find out what the needs are, and then United Way provides the funds to help them with that.

So, we've been in that program now for a little over three years. We have fifty-some folks enrolled in that program right now, and over 80% of them are working, which is awesome. And one of the great things about that program in particular is some of the employer partners for that program are more lenient when it comes to individuals that have a criminal background. So, we're often able to get them jobs that they can't get anywhere else. So that's been great.

And then, last year we started our Up Programs. So, we really looked at what are the barriers to obtaining and keeping permanent housing, and we identified a few. One of them that we identified was the cost of moving into a new place, first month rent, deposit, that kind of thing. And so, we started our Move-Up Program, which will help pay for that. It will also help catch people up who've just gotten a little behind on their rent or their utilities so they can avoid being evicted, because we know once you're evicted from a property, you're going to have a much more difficult time finding housing again. So, we have some funds for folks in those situations.

We also started our Wheels-Up Program. That we wanted to help with the permanent transportation needs. So, not just bus passes or Uber rides, because we know those aren't sustainable, but how do we help somebody get to and from work, to and from daycare, to and from the grocery store, those kinds of things, on a permanent basis. So, that has funds for things like getting your car fixed, going and getting driver's ed classes and getting your driver's license. Some of us used it for a down payment on a car, to give them a permanent transportation solution.

And then finally, we looked at the trauma that comes along with experiencing homelessness, and what can we do to help address that. And we knew we couldn't provide permanent counseling, but we wanted to be a bridge until they could get into some kind of permanent counseling. So, we can have a contract with a mental health counselor. We'll meet with them virtually and talk about what their triggers are, what their challenges are, what they're experiencing, and walk them through that and help them with some coping techniques and then guide them, get them into permanent counseling moving forward.

So, I like to say that we're really trying to help families at all kinds of spectrum of homelessness from not even being at risk, but wanting to improve your situation, to being at risk and being behind on your bills, to experiencing homelessness and needing a place to stay. My role there

as the executive director, I like to say I have the best job ever. I get to work with our families, hear their stories, and share their stories with the community, and talk about how the community can come alongside these folks and help them achieve their goals and get into a permanent housing situation.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's awesome. Thank you for sharing too about just the demographics across the country, and just the big point and picture that not every city looks the same and the services needed. Because I think sometimes it's very easy to just think, oh, it's all the same. In reality, it's not. Because every city versus town and suburb is going to have different organizations and community organizations to help, so.

Matthew Wagner:

Well, and I think too, a lot of times when somebody thinks of the homeless, they're thinking of a guy on the corner of the street with a cardboard sign, but homelessness is so much more than that. It's folks who are staying with family or friends, folks who are living in a tent or living out of their car, or paying \$2,000 a month for a hotel. There's a lot of folks that need help, but don't fall into that, what we would traditionally think of somebody who's homeless.

Matt Butensky:

And you told us so many amazing things you're doing, and one of my notes was just thinking about, you shared about all the affiliates throughout the country. Are there other Pennsylvania affiliates as well?

Matthew Wagner:

We have several across Pennsylvania. I'm not even going to try to name them all, but we have one in Pittsburgh, Redding, Montgomery County. We have a couple in the Philadelphia area.

Matt Butensky:

Okay, that's awesome. So, I wanted to ask a little bit more about how the programs work and function, and how referrals might be made or how do families find your services? And then how do they apply to participate and how many families do you serve? Those types of details.

Matthew Wagner:

So, families find out about us in any number of ways. They might do an internet search. We get a lot of referrals from some of the other shelters in the area, from schools, from school counselors, from churches. People find us any number of different ways as far as that goes. Our application process is pretty simple. We have people go on our website, it's familyformisehcr.org, G plug. And there's a button right at the top that says, "Need help," and they click on that and they fill that out and select what it is that they're looking for help with. From there, that goes to our case manager and our program manager, and they review it.

They'll set up a time to do a Zoom or a phone interview with them, find out more about their situation and how we can help, and we take it from there.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. How many families are you currently serving?

Matthew Wagner:

So we served, it was about 132 families last year. We're on pace to do a little bit more than that this year. Our shelter program, we can take up to three families at a time. Like I said, we have fifty-some in our Road to Success Program right now, and then the rest are spread across our different Up Programming.

Matt Butensky:

So your shelter program, is that the program where there's the nighttime program with a local faith organization, and then they come to you during the day? Okay. That's really cool.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah. So, I know you mentioned about different churches being a local resource. Are there other resources that you utilize from organizations that you can share with our audience about different supports that the families can get other than just from the church or from you guys?

Matthew Wagner:

Yeah, we're constantly figuring out new ways to collaborate with the other service providers in the area. We're good at serving families with children who are experiencing homelessness. We're not good at distributing food. That's not what we do. So, we partner with the food banks in the area for that. We're not an organization that's focused on providing work clothes. So, we partner with Dress for Success for that. We're always looking for opportunities to partner with other organizations in the area. As I mentioned before, we get referrals from other shelters, they refer families to us. Sometimes if a family needs longer than our program, which is a 60 to 90 day program, we will refer them to a program like Brother in Housing or Safe Harbour in Carlisle, or one of those programs.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's great. And then, so I know that you guys have them come to the day center. Can you explain, I know you said that they work on goals, but what might be some of the goals that you... And what profession is working with them specifically?

Matthew Wagner:

So, we have a case manager that will sit down with them when they come in, and assess where they're at, what their situation is and what the next step should be. And for some people that's

starting at the very beginning and they need their IDs and birth certificates, and that kind of thing. For other people, they have that. So, it's finding a job or arranging childcare, figuring out the transportation piece, all of that stuff. All of those things that need to be in place for them to have permanent housing. So, it looks different for every family. And then, they meet on a weekly basis and say, "Okay, we talked about doing this week. Where are you at with that? What have you done? What else do we need to do? What's the next step?" That kind of thing. And of course, they schedule a weekly meeting, but we're talking to them. We're working in the same building with them, so we're talking to them throughout the week as well.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

And then, is there a limit on how long they can stay in the program?

Matthew Wagner:

So, our program is designed to be a 60 to 90 day program, and it was designed that way because prior to COVID, that was the typical timeframe for somebody to obtain permanent housing. We know that that timeframe is extended since COVID. Our successful stays right now we're running somewhere between a hundred and 110 days, just because finding affordable housing and finding a landlord to give somebody a chance is more challenging now than it's ever been.

This area is the second most competitive rental market in the country behind Miami, Florida. So, a landlord's getting anywhere from 60 to 80 applications when they put a property up for listing. So, a landlord is going to look at the application from my family that might not have great credit, may have an eviction on their record or not a great tenant history, or whatever the case may be, and compare that to somebody coming in to work at one of the hospitals or for another opportunity. They're going to take the sure thing. So, finding those landlords to give them a chance is challenging sometimes. But we've been able to find landlords that are willing to work with us and work with our families, and get them into a permanent place more often than not.

Matt Butensky:

So, while the parents are at the day center, the children are at school. So, you coordinate their transportation to school. How are they getting to school? Do you serve multiple school districts in the area? How does that work?

Matthew Wagner:

Sure. Yeah, so there's a law called the McKinney-Vento Act that requires their homeschool district to transport them while they're in shelter. So, it doesn't matter what school district they come from, that school district has to provide transportation from our day center in Camp Hill to their home school while they're staying with us. And some school districts don't like that, but when they're reminded that it is the law and we will enforce the law, we'll get the van to the day center, get the kids where they need to go.

Matt Butensky:

Good. I'm glad to hear that. And so like we opened the podcast, I have been to your day center. Can you tell us more about your day center? I know that it is a very home-like environment, so can you tell us a little bit more about that environment and why it's like that?

Matthew Wagner:

Sure. I think a lot of times when somebody thinks of a homeless shelter, they think of a big room with a whole bunch of bunk beds and very sterile and that kind of thing. Ours is not that. We had a bunch of kids from Milton Hershey two years ago come in and paint murals on the walls. Oh, you're the Milton Hershey guy, okay.

Matt Butensky:

There's always that thread of Milton Hershey School with Melissa.

Matthew Wagner:

Absolutely. They were art honor students or whatever, and they came in and did murals on the wall. And it's actually kind of cool, but they each took a section, so you could really kind of see some of their personalities and what they paint on the walls. But anyway, so we have that. Downstairs at the day center we have a kitchen, so they can do some of their own cooking. We have laundry there so they don't have to pay to have laundry done, shower and bath, all of that stuff.

Downstairs too now, we have a room that has several computer stations set up in it. So, if somebody wants to take advantage of a work from home opportunity, they have young ones and don't want to do child care, they can set up in there and work from there, or just use it to do research, find jobs, do that kind thing. And the kids use it for homework as well. So, we have that all right there at the day center. And then, they all have metal lockers that they keep their stuff in, keep it locked up so it's all secure. And yeah, sometimes I call it the center ring of our three-ring circus because it can be a little chaotic. Imagine 10 to 12 people in a building along with three or four staff people trying to work. And yeah, it's a lot of fun. I've been interrupted more than once by a kid walking into my office.

Matt Butensky:

I'm sure. And so with that, I know your organization's called Family Promise. So, you do have a requirement that the people you serve are families, but what is your definition of a family for Family Promise?

Matthew Wagner:

Yeah, so the only thing that we require is that there be a child under the age of 18. But to us, a family is a group of people who live together and love each other. So, we don't care if that family is two men and a child, two women and a child. We've had a mom, a mom had to give up her kids, her sister adopted them, and their mother was helping. So it was a grandmother, an aunt, and five kids. That's a family. We've had single dads, single moms. I think we've had just about

every configuration of family that you can imagine in the time that I've been there in the three years.

Matt Butensky:

That's cool. That's great to be inclusive. We talked about your shelter program. You also mentioned your, I think you called it your Road to Success Program. Can you tell us a little bit more about Road to Success?

Matthew Wagner:

Yeah. Road to Success is a partnership with the United Way of the Capital Region. So, they have six case management sites throughout the area, that each have a dedicated case manager that will do an intake, find out what a person's interests are, where they see themselves, and then apply that to... They have about thirty-some partners from giant food to warehouses, to the hospitals that will help them find a job that pays a family sustaining wage. I think all the jobs right now are paying at least \$16 an hour, which you can discuss if that's a family sustaining wage or not, but it's better than a lot of places.

So, we'll help them with doing job interview skills, doing resumes, applying for the job, all that stuff. And then once they get the job, we look at it and say, "Okay, what are the things that they're going to need to be able to keep this?" Child care, transportation, uniforms. And we'll be able to help them with that kind of stuff. United Way even has funds for things like down payment on a car. They have money for helping with first month rent and deposit for folks in the program and all of that. So, we're one of the case management sites for that program.

Matt Butensky:

Thanks. Thanks for sharing about that one.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

So, talking about different community organizations, how can people within the community get involved at Family Promise? I was looking over your website and look that there's a lot of opportunities for involvement. Can you share that with our listeners about how they might be able to get involved at, whether it's this one here in Capital Area, or if it's anywhere in Pennsylvania?

Matthew Wagner:

Sure. Well, I say one of the biggest things is helping us get out the word about what we do. So, find our Facebook page and like us on social media, share our posts. We do a great job of sending out updates on what's going on with our families, cute stories and anecdotes about things that happen at the day center, interactions that we have, and share those. I love coming out and speaking to groups. So, I don't care if it's a Sunday school group, a group, a fishing group. You put three or four people in a room and I'll come and talk about Family Promise,

share our family stories and talk about what we do. So, that's another way that you can partner with us.

I'd also say that we're always looking for more faith-based organizations who will provide shelter for our families. COVID had a dramatic impact on faith-based institutions across the country. I say if a faith-based institution lost half of its volunteers through COVID, it did great. Most of them lost two-thirds to three-quarters. So, it's made it difficult for a lot of them to continue providing service to the families that we serve. So, we're always looking for faith-based institutions to partner with. If you have a church that has a couple of empty school Sunday school rooms that we can utilize, and you're within 30 minutes of our day center, love to talk with you about that. And then from there, we're always looking for support volunteers, for people to help drive the van, people to mow, people to serve on various committees and that kind of stuff. I say that you tell me what you're good at and I'll find a way to make it help the families that we're serving.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome. So, when these families are at the faith-based institutions, is there someone who's there overnight with them? Is it someone from your organization, someone from the church, just to give more background?

Matthew Wagner:

So, some of them have somebody who stays with them overnight. Not all of them do. We don't require it. We leave it up to the individual institution. Some of them say the pastor lives next door, something happens. They can be right there, they're not worried about it. We leave that up to them.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Good to know.

Matt Butensky:

I think you might've covered some of these, but I wanted to just take another moment to talk about your prevention and intervention programs. So, would you encapsulate Road to Success within that program, or do you have other programs that you offer around prevention and intervention for homelessness?

Matthew Wagner:

Yeah, I would consider Road to Success one of those programs. But in addition to that, then we have our Up Programming. So, those programs are our Move-Up Program, which will help with first month's rent and deposit, back rent and utilities, those things. Our Wheels Up Program will help with helping get your car fixed, down payment on a car, paying for driver's ed classes, and that kind of stuff. And I should say here, with both of those programs, we're not just going to give you a check and a pat on the back. We want to come alongside you and be there for you in

the long term. So, we have you go through some financial literacy education. We use the FDIC's Money Smart Program, so that you can learn about managing money a little bit better.

In the Move-Up program, we talked to you about what it means to be a good tenant, what does your lease mean, how do you abide by it, those things. And we also ask you to participate with us in that. So, we will give up to \$2,000, and we ask you to reimburse us up to half of that, but we give you as long as you need to do that. I'm not Guido, I'm not going to come bust your kneecaps if you don't pay us back, but it's a way for you to pay it forward. We have those two programs and then we have our Heads-Up Program, which is the temporary bridge mental health counseling to help with the trauma related to experiencing homelessness.

And I should say, we're piloting a program right now, called our Grow-Up Program, that would help with the gap between what Child Care Network covers in child care costs and what the daycare charges, at least for the first few months. So, we're piloting that right now. We'll see how that goes and whether we can expand that moving forward. But we sat down last year as a board and did a strategic plan, and looked at what are the barriers to obtaining and maintaining permanent housing, and how do we help address those the best we can?

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, well you're offering a lot of really incredible programs that, as you said, are impactful for different signs or different types of homelessness, and I think that's really cool.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, I agree. So if we're good, I think we're ready to wrap up our podcast session with you. Is there anything that you would like to highlight, for events coming up or volunteer opportunities that the community can get involved with, or just anything you think is super important for the audience to know that we might've not covered?

Matthew Wagner:

I don't know about events, but I do want to say something, especially in light of the Supreme Court decision last week. As a society, I think we tend to sometimes look down on, or maybe even vilify people experiencing homelessness. And my experience over the last almost three years now with these people is, they are some of the most resilient, resourceful people you'll ever meet. Think of a single dad with two kids that was just trying to get by, and got kicked out of his place and just needed a place to stay, to keep children and youth off his back until he could get into a permanent place again. We were able to help him. I think of the single mom that had two kids and was pregnant with a third. She was with those kids 24/7, 365. If I were in that situation, I'd be in the corner in a ball rocking myself. But she just got up every day and kept plugging away. These folks are not folks that we should be looking down on or vilifying, but they're to be admired. And it's just something I want everybody to think about.

Matt Butensky:

Matt, thank you so much. We wholeheartedly agree and we are grateful for the services that you're providing, the Capital Region with Family Promise. It sounds like there's so many great opportunities for families, so we hope that this episode will help to educate around this topic and also to help people learn about what is available to them. Our audience is across Pennsylvania and beyond, so it's great to know that there is Family Promise affiliates elsewhere in Pennsylvania and also nationally. So, thank you so much for sharing about Family Promise today. We really are happy you came by.

Matthew Wagner:

My pleasure. Happy to be here. Thank you for the opportunity.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, of course.

Matt Butensky:

So with that message, we are going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Again, thank you for being here today. And to learn more about Family Promise of Harrisburg Capital Region, please visit Family Promise HCR.

Matthew Wagner:

HCR, Harrisburg Capital Region.

Matt Butensky:

Capitalregion.org. Thank you, Matt. I know, that's awesome. Thank you. Thank you for listening to the I will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope podcast. We hope you enjoyed today's episode with Matt Wagner from Family Promise. Let's check back and tune in again.