In the current economic climate, individuals and families increasingly find themselves seeking safety nets as poverty and homelessness become a daily reality. Responding to these challenges in a comprehensive manner that respects human dignity and helps move people toward self-sufficiency invites creative partnerships and an ability to recognize practical needs that sometimes are easy to overlook.

**St. John’s Bread and Life**

St. John’s Bread and Life (SJBL), located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., caters to the needs of the local population who are homeless and/or live in poverty. This ministry, originally initiated by St. John the Baptist parish, is now operated under the auspices of St. John’s University, Queens, N.Y. Committed to the Vincentian mission to serve those in need, SJBL manages an extensive network of social programs that provide medical and legal services, help clients navigate public assistance and benefit acquisitions, offer counseling and referrals, care for the spiritual lives of their guests, and facilitate everything from tax preparation to education and training (http://www.breadandlife.org/home.html).

A significant aspect of SJBL is their focus on combating hunger and encouraging self-sufficiency. They provide hot breakfast and lunch each day on site as well as through a mobile soup kitchen. In addition to meals, the organization sponsors a digital food pantry, which allows the clients of SJBL to pick their uncooked food items off a touch screen database. The system allows the clients to select foods best suited for their individual family needs and tastes. In order to promote proper nutrition and a balanced diet, it also rewards clients who choose fresh fruits and vegetables for their grocery packs. To improve lifestyle options, SJBL offers a nutrition counseling program that

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helps parents identify the types of food that sustain healthy families.

Among their various services, SJBL sponsors Project Identity an initiative developed in 2008 by John Wilson and Eugenia Soldatos two undergraduates in the Ozanam Scholars program of St. John’s University (http://www.stjohns.edu/faith/visa/ozanam). The goal of the project is to help individuals obtain proper forms of legal identification such as birth certificates, social security cards, non-driver IDs, and marriage and divorce certificates.

Project Identify functions as a document preparation and resource service. Clients complete an intake form, providing vital information such as name, social security number, current address (if available), phone number (if available), emergency contact person, and demographic data. They specify the legal identification document(s) for which they are applying. The Project Identity case worker reviews the particular application for that document, helping the client understand exactly what that application requires. The case worker then helps the client to gather all the documents involved for the application, to fill out the form properly and to file the request. Finally the cost of the document is subsidized, in accordance with the individual financial situation of the client. Upon the arrival of the document, it is photocopied for file security and returned to the client.

Protecting Dignity by Documenting Identity

Legal identification documents are something that many of us take for granted. But to the countless people who find themselves homeless or living below the poverty line, these documents are a lifeline necessary for access to the social programs, benefits and daily services essential for survival and some measure of living with a degree of self-sufficiency. According to attorney Sara Simon Tompkins, “the lacking of photo identification is a significant problem among people who are homeless. Persons without ID are often denied critical services and benefits such as shelter, medical care, food stamps, and social security benefits” (13). Many feel that the state, which is the sole issuer of these documents, has created insurmountable barriers discouraging those who live in poverty to obtain these vital documents. This situation has been exacerbated post September 11, 2001, as “the requirements—alllegedly made stricter in response to homeland security threats—present a major barrier to employment, housing, health care, and other basic tasks and necessities of Americans’ everyday lives” (Theophano, 1). Therefore men, women, and children who are homeless and poor continue in a state of poverty.

Few social service providers are aware of and/or able to address this need. Consequently, the limited assistance available to persons who are homeless or poor often does not include legal identification documentation or a means to acquire such documentation. By providing access to the documents that establish residency or affirm identity, service providers, like SJBL’s Project Identity, open many doors to the clients that they seek to help. “Because photo identification has become a necessary tool in the move out of homelessness and poverty, states that provide homeless persons with IDs play an important role in helping their residents become self-sufficient” (Tompkins, 19).

Poverty and homelessness need to be addressed on multiple levels. Providing material aid, including but not limited to food, shelter and money, while necessary, offers temporary, short-term solutions. Legal identification documents allow access to resources and government services that are helpful in moving individuals and families
toward economic stability. They are necessary for securing bank accounts, lines of credit, and travel. They are integral to insuring a future in so much as establishing a documented identity is necessary for stability in residence, employment and education. In order to obtain a permanent residence, one must meet certain qualifications including but not limited to a secure financial foundation, character references, employment, and the ability to prove one’s identity. During the application process it is common practice for a landlord or owner to verify an interested party’s social security number and request photo identification. The inability to produce such documents can remove one from consideration.

Even education is something that can be withheld from individuals who lack the proper requirements. For example, according to New York City Department of Education (2010), parents must provide a valid birth certificate for their child to be enrolled in a New York City school. In addition, they must provide proof of residency in the form of non-driver ID cards, passports, utility bills, or self-addressed mailings—none of which are common amongst homeless men and women, and their families.

The social and psychological effects of homelessness and poverty also require response. Even psychological benefits have been attributed to the procurement of legal identification documents. A tangible ID card fosters and possibly “contributes to the sense of validation and legitimacy” (Theophano, 2) encouraging a confidence grounded in self-identification. In the words of one service provider, “Having identification allows people to gain independence and empower themselves” (Crowell, 1).

The protection of human rights is a social responsibility as affirmed by Catholic Social Teaching:

First among these are the rights to life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and basic education. These are indispensable to the protection of human dignity. . . . All persons have a right to security in the event of sickness, unemployment, and old age . . . the right to healthful working conditions, to wages, and other benefits sufficient to provide individuals and their families with a standard of living in keeping with human dignity, and to the possibility of property ownership. (Economic Justice for All, 80)

Insuring and protecting these rights is not just a responsibility for people of faith or for religious organizations. These rights are consistent with those articulated in the United Nations Universal Charter of Human Rights.

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (Article 25, 1)

There are no one size fits all solutions, but comprehensive care requires an openness to attend to the practical details, the aspects of life we take for granted in times of stability. Project Identity is but one example of a number of similar projects across the United States that recognize insuring human rights entails removing obstacles that block access to the most basic human, material and social needs.
References


