

# A Decade of Fighting Homelessness

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In 1991, after a year of research and study, the Melville Charitable Trust launched a unique philanthropy with its principal focus on confronting and solving the causes of homelessness. It was and is the only significant private foundation in America to have this as its *raison d'être*.

Behind every effective funding agency—as behind every effective nonprofit—there is a board that acts as the steward or custodian for its mission. In the case of the Melville Charitable Trust, its board is much more than a guardian; it is its guiding light.

The Trust is animated by the wisdom, vision, and commitment of Frank and Alan Melville, their son Steve, and their life-long friend and colleague, John Gibb. These are people for whom empowerment and justice and fairness are active values that have deep, active meaning in their lives. The Trust is a continuing and accurate reflection of that.

And fortunately for Connecticut, the board of the Trust decided at the very beginning to concentrate its philanthropy on making an impact in this state, setting out to provide a model that funders in other states might learn from and emulate.

The Trust has been proactive whenever it has seen a need that wasn't being met. It discovered early on, for example, that the housing and services groups in the state lacked an infrastructure that would enable them to learn from one another, work collaboratively and plan strategically. In response, the Trust funded and has continued to fund coalition efforts in housing, homelessness, investment, and legal services that have had significant influence in shaping action and policy on local, state, and national levels.

Another vital advocacy and education innovation has been the Trust's support of Partnership for Strong Communities, a working coalition of key statewide organizations that have agreed to craft a united approach to challenging the state of Connecticut to produce more affordable housing.

The Trust's operational style is collaborative. Unlike most funding agencies, it thinks of its grantees as program partners working to achieve a common goal, and you will often see Trust staff and board members actively engaged in supporting the programs it funds.

The Trust has worked with providers and developers in the production, rehabilitation, or regeneration of over 2,000 units of well-designed, safe, permanent, and affordable housing. The range and variety of that housing is remarkable in and of itself—transitional housing, accessible housing, limited equity and cooperative housing, housing that renews a city neighborhood, housing that enhances a suburban community; rental and home ownership for people with mental and physical disabilities, for formerly homeless and substance abusers, for single women with children, for those suffering from

AIDS. Reading the Trust's just-published Decade Report is like reviewing a Baedeker or operating guide to housing for the homeless.

Leveraging philanthropic investment is a high priority for the Trust. One of the Trust's most successful collaborations has been with the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH). With Trust funding CSH brought its model to Connecticut, and it led to the first-ever statewide funder's collaborative to match Melville Trust's start-up grant of \$450,000. This initial outlay has generated approximately \$30M in state and private foundation funding—with more on the way. It also produced a first-ever, state government cabinet group to focus on service-enriched housing. Having concluded a successful demonstration program, CSH is now on its next phase, armed with convincing data on its cost-effectiveness from a comprehensive evaluation that the Trust underwrote.

Very often the Trust has been the investor of last resort for nonprofit developers. It has provided the pre-development, soft or missing money to housing deals that might not have been made otherwise. Through loans, grants and guarantees, the Trust has become the source of more new housing for the most vulnerable in Connecticut than any other private player.

The Trust has proven to be a funder that is not afraid to take risks. A bold combination of mega-grants and loans enabled St. Luke's LifeWorks first to outbid several for-profit nursing homes for the purchase of a bankrupt YWCA facility in downtown Stamford. Then with subsequent Trust funding, St. Luke's established a comprehensive and collegial model of housing and services for homeless women and children that has placed most key agency services under one roof. This includes a day care facility that effectively commingles children from homeless families and kids from parents working in downtown Stamford corporations—they all enter through the same door. St. Luke's has become a regional exemplar that is being cited for its highly effective approach to ending homelessness for single parent families.

Some of the Trust's support has had a resonating impact far beyond the projects it funds. For example, it was a loan of \$245,000 to the West Hartford Interfaith Coalition that was the linchpin of the Coalition's ability to sustain litigation against the Town of West Hartford. The Coalition challenged the Town's zoning denial of its plan to build affordable, limited equity housing. It was the first community-housing group to test the new "Affordable Housing Appeals Act," taking the case to the Connecticut Supreme Court—and against all predictions, they won a unanimous victory, fundamentally changing the course of housing law in the state.

Speaking of case law, the Trust recognized that the shift of federal welfare and support services to the state level would invariably result in imbalances and inequities that would penalize the homeless and the voiceless. So it has become the largest source of private support for all legal services in Connecticut. In return, the Trust asked the state's three legal services projects to begin to coordinate services, share information, and collaborate on law reform and public policy advocacy initiatives. The result is the first statewide legal services collaborative in the country. It has played a key role in

challenging and softening punitive agency regulations and protecting such rights as the health care of women and their families.

The Trust also underwrites the staff support for the National Housing Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities. The Technical Assistance Collaborative in Boston plays the staff role for the project and has been able to secure an additional \$80M in Section 8 subsidies from Congress and the Clinton Administration since beginning its advocacy work. In conjunction with underwriting the staff, the Trust now funds the publication of a national newsletter for housing activists and the homeless themselves. It is a clearly written and invaluable resource on housing rights for those with mental and physical disabilities.

Another funding innovation has been the Trust's support of Connecticut Voices for Children, which the Trust has engaged to produce ongoing research on the impact of welfare reform on poor and homeless women and families. The leadership of Voices has become the most powerful source of data and analysis on state budgetary decisions not only as they affect the poor, but as these same decisions also affect business, education, employment, and other vital sectors of our common weal.

Similarly on the national level, the Trust had funded the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute's report on homelessness in America (the first national study in fourteen years).

Perhaps the Melville story is best told through the lives of those who are living every day with homelessness—the mentally and physically disabled, those struggling with substance abuse, the victims of domestic violence, the dispossessed families with children, and those who simply don't have enough resources to keep a roofs over their heads. The Trust supports dozens of inventive shelter, service, counseling, job-training, and education programs in communities across the state. The hard-working practitioners in these programs make possible the small victories and incremental steps on the road to self-sufficiency for hundreds upon hundreds of homeless people every year.

The Trust has supported publications to give voice and meaning to these efforts. Funded by the Trust and just released is a collection of stories by men and women who are homeless and those working with them in New Haven. *As I Sat on the Green* provides gripping insights into the every day reality of homelessness.

A short time ago, the Trust also published *Home Work: The Quiet Success Story of Affordable Housing in Connecticut*. A finely produced photographic record of solid accomplishment, it was sent to all office holders in Connecticut. Many housing and interfaith groups have used the book as a teaching guide when going before local officials. The book is a powerful counter to the notion that housing for the poor is a community blight.

It is due in no small measure to the Trust's diligent and steady funding over the past decade that we are beginning to see a perceptible shift in the attitudes and actions of

policy makers and opinion makers in the state and region. More and more, the issues of housing and homelessness are getting the serious priority on legislative agendas and in editorial boardrooms that they have long deserved.

Finally, it is more than modesty that compels the Trust leadership to emphasize that the amount it invests to address these problems is very tiny in comparison with the resources available through the public sector.

Homelessness, the Trust maintains, is, after all, a community problem, and it is the role of government to see to it that no one is left behind. Philanthropic entities like the Trust have the flexibility to fund demonstrations, pilots, emergent models, and best practices that show how homelessness can be solved. It is the Trust's hope and intention that its work will point to the most promising approaches where state and federal funding and investments can make truly large-scale impacts that will bring a permanent end to homelessness.