

Marisa Zapata:

Hi y'all, I'm Marisa Zapata, and this is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts, who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness, to understand what we're missing in the headlines and soundbites. In each episode we'll help clear up misconceptions about homelessness, and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond. Who am I? I'm an associate professor of land use planning at Portland State University, and director of PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Speaker 2:

In this episode we talk with Julia Delgado, the vice president of the Urban League of Portland, about what it means to be culturally specific in homelessness services, and historic lack of access for black residents to affordable housing, and how that inspired the Urban League and other culturally specific providers to get involved.

Marisa Zapata:

I wanted to know first a little bit about you and what brings you to the work on homelessness, and what brought you to Portland?

Julia Delgado:

Sure, yeah. So I moved to Portland to go to graduate school. I went to a technical school, I became a registered nurse when I turned 19, and then I started working in nursing, and I hated it. So then I went to college for health policy, and I loved that, and I went to University of Rochester. And then I just took my basically direct service skills that I had, and then the health background, and I started working in human services, almost accidentally. And that's when I was like, oh, this is helping people. So being able to work one on one with individuals, and help them overcome whatever obstacles they may be facing, and be creative, and walk where you've already been. These are not immigrants, but I'm a first generation American.

Marisa Zapata:

I just want to make sure that we've touched on this, because people are so confused about Puerto Rico and what that identity is like. We can't obviously get into the identity of a Puerto Rican, but the idea that you're born on an island, and you grew up in New York, this idea that you have a similar experience, maybe, to immigrants, but you're also not an immigrant.

Julia Delgado:

Yeah, I think one of the things that's different from the immigrant experience is the place of privilege because of the ability to travel back and forth. And I think a lot of people don't understand that as an immigrant to this country you don't really have free range to go back to your home country and visit, whereas if you're a Puerto Rican, that's the privilege, but then you all are treated like an immigrant everywhere you go. You look a little different, or you have an accent, so you have that same experience. But then for the Puerto Ricans that live on the island, you're a colonial subject. You have almost no say in the government that controls you. You have some more privileges, because you're able to travel, and then fewer privileges because you're a colonial subject.

Marisa Zapata:

I think that last sentence just summarizes it really well, and I think the people just will lose sight, and part of why I think this is interesting, particularly for listeners who might be in Portland and Oregon, is that, we were talking about before the interview, there's like 10 Puerto Ricans. And I'm joking, for all Puerto Ricans, Julia made the joke, not me.

Julia Delgado:

But hit me up if you hear this.

Marisa Zapata:

We could be a Puerto Rican matchmaking service. So what brought you to Portland? You were in Rochester.

Julia Delgado:

Oh, so I didn't finish. So I was in Rochester, then I started working in human services in New York City. And then I wanted to get a master's degree, so I applied to programs, I wanted to get my master's in public health and my master's in social work, and there's only like five programs in the nation, and one of them is the PSU OHSU dual degree program, and so I got into that and I moved here just for graduate school, and then I had a baby, and then I had roots. and I stayed, but it's hard now, because my whole family is back east, so that's really hard, I get homesick a lot. It's also, again, not a big community here, so stuff like foods, or things like that, are some cultural stuff. But there's salsa dancing here, there's a Cuban restaurant that I feel at home at. There's little pockets, but I've been here now since 2008.

Marisa Zapata:

But I think this is actually a great segue to these conversations about culturally specific. And you're with Urban League, I don't know if you can talk a little bit about what y'all are trying to do in terms of culturally specific and what that actually looks like.

Julia Delgado:

Sure. So I've been with Urban League for nine years now, and Urban League is a culturally specific organization that's dedicated to the black community, and so rather than being an issue specific organization, we just serve the black community in a variety of capacities. So we try to carry out our mission through policy and system change through direct service, and through personal and individual advocacy. And so those are our three pronged approach. And Urban League, our chapter, is 76 years old. We've really changed the shape of Oregon in a lot of meaningful and important ways, like their housing, their Urban League. When Governor Hatfield signed the bill, the Urban League president at the time is standing next to him at that bill signing. There have been other big public accommodations, and things like that, that were just foundational to moving towards equity.

Julia Delgado:

Oregon's Fair Housing Act is better than the federal Fair Housing Act, and also was implemented before the federal Fair Housing Act, so even though Oregon has a ton of racist history, and present, there are some anti-racist policies that were enacted a little bit in advance of the rest of the nation, And I think due to work from the Urban League. So because of that we're just this issue specific organization, I don't really consider myself an expert on housing. What I would consider myself an expert on is just the need

that was going unmet. And so Urban League shifted to the current role that we have in outreach and services to people who are experiencing homelessness and housing instability, really as a result of unmet need that for years, I would say, that every person who came through our doors, or every person who contacted us on the phone, was going through it, they were going through a housing crisis, and the resources were insufficient, but also insufficient period.

Julia Delgado:

Incompetent, specifically to the black community, without being able to understand stuff like the historic displacement, and ongoing displacement, or understanding the basics of overcoming having a criminal background, and how that relates to housing and homelessness. Even in the most well-meaning white people, the most well meaning people, have anti-blackness built into, it's poison in the air that we breathe, and unless you are actively undoing that, if you have a paper bag of fresh air that you're constantly dipping into, you're going to perpetuate that anti-blackness. And so the Urban League, we're that fresh air. Everything we do is everything who we are. It's actually gotten more and more frustrating over the years to be in human services as other people have become woke, and then they ask you questions about how you be culturally specific, or what's your racial equity plan, and at Urban League it's us. All of our plans are that.

Marisa Zapata:

By definite you're culturally specific. And so to me what becomes interesting, and so there's two things I was hoping you could talk about, one is the reality is that attention turned to the organizations that we're working with around racial groups, around homelessness, for a reason. What do you think that gap was? What, for lack of a better term, what were the white dominant organizations fucking up? Why did the-

Julia Delgado:

Everything, they were fucking up everything. They were not serving people of color, black people. And I'm really, just my expertise is people who identify as black or African American. If you looked back to the 2013 reports from the joint office, that was when they started moving to the Hope Project, does that sound familiar to you?

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah.

Julia Delgado:

So when you look at the outputs of that project, they were 80% white, because Portland is 80% white, or whatever, so they were like, we're doing great there, and that's wrong. It's actually incorrect, because homelessness at that time was very much, and still is, and actually worse so now, disproportionate among people of color. So they were, just from the basics, not serving enough of, that's the Hope initiative. The big ones, the big homeless services organizations all came together to move towards coordinated access for adults, and their results were not good.

Julia Delgado:

And at the same time, homelessness was going up for black Portlanders both in real numbers, as in the number of individuals who identified as not having a safe place to sleep, and also in terms of percentage of the homeless population, both of those things were growing at the same time that this initiative was

successful. And it's really hard when you're talking about homeless services, because any person moving from indoors to outdoors is successful, I'm not taking away that success, but if you're not doing it with an eye towards undoing the racist damage, it's not fully successful, it's successful through a certain population.

Julia Delgado:

But even then, so it's just the service, but then it was also the outcomes, so that shelters, the shelter system, the permanent supportive housing system, evictions from affordable housing, were all disproportionately felt in the black community. So black women were put up of shelter at a rate of three times higher than white women in Portland. That doesn't make any sense. There's a lot of other little disparities like that. And at the same time Urban League was seeing just a ton of people in need whose needs were not being met. And so we did what we do, we wouldn't go away. At that point the joint office didn't exist, we went to the Housing Bureau, we're like, we demand action here for black Oregonians. We applied for some kind of RFP, we didn't get it, I wouldn't drop it.

Julia Delgado:

And then it was really partnerships would join, and Cascadia Behavioral Health, they were like, "No, we hear what you're actually saying, and okay." But they were not meaningful partnerships, they were like, "You can have a chunk of our budget to do what you do best." And that was appreciated, but at the time it was better, we had no resources at all when it came to. We're just, at that point we're best known for our economic development and employment, which is then all of our work was failing, because if you don't have a house to live, your job prospects are real terrible. And if you can't have your basic needs met, your outcomes are not going to be great. Even our senior services, people were moving into assisted living who really didn't want to or need to because of housing affordability. It was impacting all of our other areas of work. So then we started showing up at the Housing Bureau.

Marisa Zapata:

This is interesting, because I will tell you when I entered this conversation, and some different versions, not of your story in particular, but a lot of the person of color serving organizations, what I heard about bringing everybody to the table. So yes, go on.

Julia Delgado:

I'm telling, for me it was like, I'm not going away. And I remember a phone meeting where we were just yelling into the speaker phone about, "You don't see the people that we see every day." And eventually the Housing Bureau, I don't know how, but they chose to contract with us. I don't think we applied at that point, they just said, "We hear you," and then we contracted with them, and only applied for a HUD grant, which was such a long shot we did not think we would get it, because Ryan kept being like, "Would you calm down the blackness?" And we were like, "No."

Marisa Zapata:

I'm on the Resource Advisory Committee, I remember your application. We advocated hard. I mean, I don't think there was any doubt that y'all were going to be the pick, but it was a big deal, because it was the first time that we had put forward these racial equity metrics. We were very conscious in how we wrote the things, but one of our questions was, how are you going to help these groups suddenly be part of the HUD continuum? So it was interesting, so I came on just as A Home for Everyone was being launched, and probably around the same time that y'all applied.

Marisa Zapata:

It was interesting because they were talking at that time, and it wasn't about specific groups, they were talking to about, there was this debate about whether it made more sense to invest in culturally specific providers to expand their practices to do homelessness, or to invest in the white dominant providers to learn how to do culturally specific work. And obviously the prioritization that A Home for Everyone and the Resource Advisory Committee pushed for was no, just invest in the culturally specific providers if they actually want to do this work. What is interesting, I think, is that I had never heard a narrative that the culturally specific providers, any of them, were at the door fighting to be part of it.

Julia Delgado:

Oh no, we definitely were. SEI too.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, that's interesting.

Julia Delgado:

After we were part of the family system, but they were fighting to be able to actually deliver culturally specific services. Self Enhancement, Inc., which is the other, there's like four big black organizations in Portland, SEI is one of them, Self Enhancement, Inc., they were part of the family system, but the way that the family coordinated access worked was like the mobile housing team, and you just got next up. And so even though their expertise and their drive for being part of this was really just, again, to meet a need. If you're going to be successful educator, certainly need to make sure, so that was an unmet need, so we stepped in. But then they weren't able to deliver culturally specific services, they were serving anybody that came along. So they were looking to be able to fulfill their mission, we were just looking for some coins. Whatever anybody has that we could get people into housing, we would really appreciate it.

Julia Delgado:

I'm so cynical, because to me actually what happened was we begged and begged and begged, we applied for this RFP, were denied. I was barking up a lot of trees, not just me, Urban League was barking up a lot of trees, and then the Point-in-Time count for 2013 came out, and it showed a 51% increase in unsheltered African Americans, which whatever, the Point-in-Time count is what it is, but that, I believe, is when all of a sudden it was like, well, who was just yelling at me the other day? Wasn't that the Urban League? And that's my cynical perspective on how it happened, was that they were like, "You don't even do homeless services, we're not really interested, you don't have the outcomes," and then they were like, "Oh, this is not going to look good for us, let's have a solution ready." Again, that's my cynical interpretation, no one had told me what had happened.

Marisa Zapata:

Think you're wrong, though. I mean, just the fact that, the way I had heard a lot of this narrative was that it was convincing black and indigenous and LatinX organizations to go into homeless services, as opposed to your own advocacy and saying you wanted to be part of it. I think it's consistent with a cynical take on it. People being surprised by the 2013 Point-in-Time count, that's when I came, and so I remember people were surprised.

Julia Delgado:

Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

And it's like, how dare you be surprised? Who are you listening to and who are you not listening to? Because there should be no surprise here.

Julia Delgado:

Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

And so I think it is, I know that the Point-in-Time count, I don't remember if it was 2013 or 2015, whichever we ended up using for the Home for Everyone rack that year was instrumental in making a case for why we could release a call for the bonus funding that could make the case for black communities. That data was essential, but also, how could you not have already anticipated this? So I think you're right, I don't think there's any question about suddenly everyone freaked out.

Marisa Zapata:

So this is one of the things that I think that I'm always asked by people who are white. What is different about the work that you're doing? And so I don't know if you looked at it, but I did a survey with Street Roots in the joint office and Shannon Singleton last fall, where we actually went out and asked people a bunch of questions about their experiences being unsheltered. But one of the things I asked was these questions around, how do you, as somebody who's experiencing homelessness, so as a person of color, know that you could be treated well at a place? And so the obvious things that you hear a lot about is looks like or sounds like, and that's really important. But I think that because of this white dominant space that we operate in, we're going to have to figure out how to add more to it. How does Urban League differentiate that work? I'm an anthropologist originally, so I have a very specific idea of what cultural means.

Julia Delgado:

Oh, you're so many things. That it's just being able to communicate, but I think that what we do in our staff is that we hire people who have been through it. Our main model at Urban League is a community health worker model, where it's a person who has experience whatever specific lived experience, and then they are heavily trained. And that's what we've prioritized over anything else, over education, over any kind of specific skill, is that relationship and trust in the community is first and foremost, and that's what we're screening for, and that's what we're hiring for, so that people aren't bringing their personal networks to work. I think in other places you're-

Marisa Zapata:

That's amazing, tell me more about this. Tell me more about this, what does it look like?

Julia Delgado:

It looks like a lot of our hires are word of mouth, a lot of our hires are like, "Oh, you should talk to my friend, he just got his two year chip, he just got peer certified, he's really trying to do good." And so one of our first hire on our housing team, our homeless outreach team, I will name his name because I know he wouldn't mind, he's not with us anymore, but his name was Darrell White, and he had been, there

was an article about him in The Oregonian, he had been arrested, 43 arrests, or something like that, and then he got into some kind of a program at Central City, and then turned his life around. And that then all he wanted to do since then was help people, so he was a certified peer recovery mentor, and then he started working for us on the intensive street engagement program.

Julia Delgado:

But it was really that why he was successful was because he knew everybody who was out on the streets. And so what we were able to do is get him more training, and get him more trained up on, okay, well this is how you manage dual relationships, and this is how you that, but that first hand knowledge, I would take it 8 million times over somebody who just had a bachelor's degree and was ready to go, because I think that firsthand knowledge, especially in Portland where you understand the layers of adversity, that a black person experiencing homelessness who has made substance use or mental health, all of those layers, it's a unique experience. Uniquely terrible, it's a unique experience that there's not a lot of paths, and so to have a person who has walked the path to walk you through it, there's really no replacement for that, no amount of case worker is going to be able to walk you through it.

Julia Delgado:

And I think where we differ, some of the white dominant culture organizations have culturally specific programs, but those culturally specific programs are still operating within the system that was, and I will argue to the death, until I'm blue in the face on this, they were set up for a male white veteran population, and designed to serve that population.

Marisa Zapata:

I will agree with you 100%.

Julia Delgado:

But they won't, they don't care.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh, I know my friend, I know.

Julia Delgado:

So that even if you're operating in that confine, all of your resources, all of your processes, all of your rules and regulations and program agreements, and all of those things, are confined within that structure. And we didn't have any structure at all. We was like application? Okay. Yeah, that makes sense, we should have an application. But for real, we didn't have structure, so we really got to make a lot of it up, and then change it and say, okay, this isn't working, we need to maybe get an agreement with the landlord. Or, okay, this isn't working, we need to maybe blah, blah, blah. We need someone visiting every day. We need someone, whatever. And so we got to make the structures, we got to build our structure for our community, just like they did. We're just doing it 50 years later, but we got to do that.

Julia Delgado:

Then as we expanded we thought about what made Darrell successful, okay, well it was his experience, it was that. So then we were like, okay, that's who we'll hire for. And we interview for it, we talk about, we do a lot of scenario work in our interviews so that we're setting people up for success. And then we also

have to, look, I think that one of the things that why we need to be treated differently than other organizations is we need to invest more in training than probably a dominant cultural organization would, we need to invest more in supervision because you're sometimes taking people who this is early in their career, or early in this part of their career, and they need a lot of check-ins.

Julia Delgado:

But I think that they're so motivated to give back, and that Urban League can be a place where you get to not just give broadly, but give to your own community. It's really, I don't know, I don't think there's a lot of organizations where you were really get that and that it's celebrated. People say a lot about working here, this is the first job that I've ever gotten to be myself. I actually feel that way here, that's huge too.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, I mean, I work in a white dominant institution, and I worked in an almost exclusively black office, and an almost exclusively Latino office, and the difference between how you show up is amazing. Even the white dominant organizations that have culturally specific programs, when I think about being a staff member in those programs, that experience from the jump is just going to be different, and that's going to change how that program functions. Because it's not going to ever be a full bubble, and so the staff is still going to be coming up against those white dominant structures, and ways of having to be in a space.

Marisa Zapata:

I had two quick other questions. So at a Home for Everyone meeting you were really pushing back on how HousingFirst, with its fancy name and fancy studies, is really just what communities of color, particularly black communities, already do and already knew. And I'm wondering if you had anything that you could add to that? What is it about black communities, or with your experience working with black communities, that told you this HousingFirst model is obvious and the best way to serve black communities?

Julia Delgado:

Yeah, well I remember that meeting in particular, because I think I was pushing back most from that they were trying to say Transitional Housing, capital T capital H, was not worthy of exploration because of the evidence base that it was not cost efficient, or whatever. And that was important to me on a level because the evidence base, if you actually go look at the evidence base you will see that it is a white male veteran population which they were studying. So I just don't want to take it as fact, first of all, but that second of all, so that's the HousingFirst, the rules and regulations that come with HousingFirst, they're all approaching them with these capital letters because that's how HUD brings it down to us.

Julia Delgado:

We don't need to do that, we are our own independent jurisdiction. I understand we want to be attractive to HUD and keep ourselves competitive, and so some of the things need to be in compliance, but they don't, it could just be to our investment strategies. And so to be like, well HUD doesn't like transitional housing, so we can't do transitional housing. And I don't even necessarily think that transitional housing, the way that they're thinking of it, and the transitional housing the way that I was thinking of it are the same thing. I'm not thinking of capital T capital H, I'm thinking that there are people, women, survivors of domestic violence, who do better in congregate living settings, because community is intrinsic to mental health.

Julia Delgado:

The black community is so diluted in Oregon, due to gentrification, that that resilience that's built into other cities that have black neighborhoods, which don't exist in Portland anymore, so you can't call somebody to say, "Hey, can you watch the baby for two hours? I have to learn to blah, blah, blah," you can't do that because everybody's so spread apart. There are some opportunities to explore what would actually work best, like listening to the communities impacted to be like, well, what would they want? And when you're in the most stressful period of your life, and then you're handed a house key to a place really far out, and you don't have a network of support, returning to your network of support, even if they're terrible for you and it's not your own goal, but that belonging is essential to survival. So we could create communities where people could support each other, and when those communities are created, even for a short time, they work.

Julia Delgado:

So I feel like there was more to your question that I didn't answer, but that was the backstory of why I won't shut up, because I just don't think that we need to think about what HUD says when we're trying to plan for whatever.

Marisa Zapata:

So the last thing I wanted to ask you about is we've got this huge supportive housing services fund that's coming out. What are you really looking for to see that we're doing racial equity different?

Julia Delgado:

I have been, from the jump, so skeptical of this measure, and I still am. I'm very worried because I think eventually the measure will just be to prop up the homeless industrial complex, and I'm worried about it from that. So I think that investing more in public discourse that welcomes people of all incomes and of all housing backgrounds into all the housing markets in Portland is something that we need to maybe do some work on. There's just a lot of NIMBY-ism that's preventing progress. I like the motel shelter idea, because at least there's plumbing, so I think investing in those is maybe a good short term solution to really get human beings to be able to have an opportunity to live indoors as a baseline, so I think that that's okay.

Julia Delgado:

I'm worried about how so much of it is dedicated to supportive services because it assumes a deficit in skill, or in life skills. And there will always be people who live in poverty, and that's because of capitalism, and so we don't... Well, certainly there are people who are experiencing homelessness, and a large majority of them definitely need services to be able to access housing, no question. I think that we're ignoring all of the multitude of failures that have led to people experiencing homelessness, and so we're taking the most expensive solution, serve the homeless people, and investing very heavily in it because it's visible, and we're skipping all the steps along the way.

Julia Delgado:

And so with this massive bill that people, you know that Oregonians is going to report on it in a year and be like, "No one changing homelessness, what a waste of money," it'll take people and get them opposed to these kinds of bills. Portland Business Alliance is going to ring that bell. And then the little investments that we could be and should be making on prevention of homelessness, like investing in more affordable housing, investing in better school programming and better economic opportunities, and better mental

health and better substance use, and those investments for people who are not yet, and will never experience homelessness, because they've had an intervention that they needed to prevent it, that's what I want to see.

Julia Delgado:

And I understand we already have the problem, so okay, we have to deal with it, but I'm just worried about the way that they did the break up of the A and BA and group a can get this kind of service, and group B is this amount of investment, and I think that if they'd just been like, here's money overall, it's to prevent homelessness, I would've liked that better. I guess that's not done in government.

Marisa Zapata:

No, but I think that one of the things that's missing, this is helping me think about how to articulate this better, is that when we split up the populations this way, we're missing the opportunity to think about how they are actually connected in terms of both prevention and resolution. And I think criminal justice is always the easiest example, but I've been really thinking about out the mental health components lately, because everyone talks about how critical mental health is for people who have been chronically homeless, with severe mental illness, but also that mental health providers, if we're going to be successful with people of color, have to actually match the racial group of the person that they're serving.

Julia Delgado:

Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

And we know that with mental health that is even more important than other kinds of healthcare.

Julia Delgado:

Period.

Marisa Zapata:

So I get that, and yet I don't see anybody talking about the fact that we have a deficit of mental health providers in Oregon to start with, and an even more escalated deficit for mental health providers of color. And if people who are experiencing homelessness right now who are black and unsheltered and chronically homeless need that kind of mental health support, well so do other people who are on the cusp of homelessness. And so if instead we said, if we do not have mental health providers who are black here to serve people with severe mental illness, that helps do both of these things, and instead we're like, does that go for population A or population B? And I just feel like we're missing the actual racial equity things, that are both these upstream things that you're talking about, as well as the ways in which we solve homelessness. They're not separate things.

Julia Delgado:

No.

Marisa Zapata:

Which is what's been driving me crazy. I'm like, it's the same thing.

Julia Delgado:

And population A and population B are the same people on different timelines.

Marisa Zapata:

Yes, exactly, exactly.

Julia Delgado:

And we have a limited opportunity to impact them on timeline A, the freeform timeline, and so instead we're going to throw all of our resources in population B. And I, again, being a cynical person I think it's because population B is more visible, but population A is much larger, and experiencing more trauma.

Marisa Zapata:

Absolutely.

Julia Delgado:

It's just less prolonged

Marisa Zapata:

In population, well I confused on which is which.

Julia Delgado:

Me too.

Marisa Zapata:

Unsheltered chronic population is visibly whiter. And again, that's not true if you look at the numbers, but it's both that they are visible and that they're white and visible.

Julia Delgado:

Yeah, white and visible. But then your study that you did with Shannon where it was people of color who are unsheltered who you were able to encounter who didn't have a tent, didn't have a food resource.

Marisa Zapata:

The tent thing killed me.

Julia Delgado:

No, me too, me too, we shared with our outreach. Team.

Marisa Zapata:

There is a disparity with tents.

Julia Delgado:

We got money from the join ups to go buy tent and give them out, we did, we did that.

Marisa Zapata:

Awesome, awesome.

Julia Delgado:

We read that report in our housing team meeting and we're just like, fuck, this is fucked.

Marisa Zapata:

Seriously, we're actually goddamn disparities on tents.

Julia Delgado:

That report was really important to us.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. It was great to do too, and it's one of those things that it's nice to [crosstalk 00:33:54], so it was awesome.

Speaker 2:

That was Julia Delgado, the vice president of the Urban League of Portland. Thank you for joining us today. If you'd like to learn more about our guests, and browse the suggested reading for each episode, check out our website, understandinghomelessness.org.

Marisa Zapata:

Thank you so much for making time, this was awesome.

Julia Delgado:

Of course, thank you for this, this was wonderful. I hope you got some useful things out of it.

Marisa Zapata:

Absolutely, yes.

Julia Delgado:

It was to connect, and thank you for thinking of me.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh yeah, thanks for joining, this was awesome.