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### A Poverello Emergency Shelter Resident's Hierarchy of Needs

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Jean Church

## Research Abstract: A Poverello Emergency Shelter Resident's Hierarchy of Needs

A qualitative research project was completed at the Poverello Emergency Shelter. The project's research question was: How does an individual's needs and experiences impact their length of stay at the Emergency Shelter? The participants were 24 shelter residents and 4 shelter resistant individuals; in total 28 individuals who are homeless in Missoula participated in semi-structured interviews. 25% of the participants were female, and 75% were male. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 67 years old, the average age of the participants was 44 years old. These demographics correspond with the overall population demographics of the Poverello Emergency Shelter.

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 196 pages of qualitative data. The data was analyzed using an inductive grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006). All data analysis was done manually, without the use of a computer data analysis program, such as ATLAS.ti. The primary researcher and research assistant each analyzed 50% of the data, wrote memos, and developed code lists independently. The researchers compared their memos and code lists, and agreed on a revised code list that was used in the second round of coding. The second round of coding was completed by the primary researcher. Inter-rater reliability was established by the research assistant reviewing the primary researcher's codes for accuracy.

The primary research finding was that Poverello residents have a hierarchy of needs that impact their length of stay at the Emergency Shelter. The findings showed that individuals who are new to Missoula, suffering from an acute or chronic health problem, middle aged or older, and/or have a history of repeated stays at the shelter are at a higher risk to stay at the shelter longer. The residents' base level needs were identified as health problems and familiarity with Missoula, the secondary need was to establish an income, and the final need was to find housing.

These findings are significant to the Poverello Emergency Shelter because it will help guide policy and program development. The Emergency Shelter will use this information to inform how they train their staff to engage shelter residents. Specifically, staff will be trained to engage residents based on their individual needs. For example, just because a person is homeless, doesn't mean staff should ask them what their plan for housing is, especially if they don't have an income. The hierarchy of needs is reflected in a shelter resident's statement "I'm not really focusing on the housing aspect right now, as much as getting a job. Getting a job is a big part of it. I mean I've got to handle this before I handle that task. It doesn't matter if a place is 5 something or 4 something a month with all the utilities paid, because it doesn't matter, because I have to have a job before I can think about that."

Minimum research has been published about homeless populations and homeless shelter programs. This research project builds on existing research. This research project followed the recommendations of a homeless shelter evaluation that was completed in two major metropolitan areas, the research recommended that shelters develop a better understanding of the needs of

their longer stay residents in order to develop and focus their programming to meet the needs of their clients (Culhane, 1998). This research will enable the Poverello to better understand and meet the needs of Missoula's homeless population.

A national trend for addressing the needs of individuals who are homeless is to provide housing first. Many of the evidence based practices for homeless individuals are based on the housing first model of service. Currently, these evidence based practices are not applicable in Missoula where there is a lack of low-income housing. These research findings are a reminder that the needs of homeless shelter residents are community dependent and impacted by available services.

Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage Publications.

Culhane, D.P. &Kuhn, R. (1998). Patterns and determinants of public shelter utilization among homeless adults in New York and Philadelphia. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17(1), 23-43.