

# Amy Thompson\_final v2

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

homelessness, people, community, folks, pov, housing, pandemic, challenges, work, staff, housed, thinking, stay, understand, prioritized, hear, amy, moved, shelter, living

## SPEAKERS

Justin Angle, Jeff Pettacord, Amy Thompson

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- A** Amy Thompson 00:01  
There are so many wins at the Pov. And I often say the Pov is like a roller coaster because we are dealing with so many people who are at so many different kind of phases and stages in where they're at with their own personal crisis and homelessness.
- J** Justin Angle 00:31  
This is a new angle. And I'm your host, Justin. This show is supported by first security bank, Blackfoot communications, and the University of Montana College of Business. Hey, folks, welcome back. And thanks for tuning in.
- J** Justin Angle 00:46  
COVID has made our lives more difficult in myriad ways. But try to imagine how difficult it would be if you lost your home. Running a homeless shelter is a difficult challenge, even in the best of times. And these are not the best of times. Amy Allison Thompson is the executive director of the Poverello Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing food, shelter, clothing, and other essential services to the hungry and homeless population in and around Missoula, Montana.
- J** Justin Angle 01:19

In today's conversation, we get the pandemic state of play, from Amy's perspective, debunk some of the more pernicious myths about homelessness. And learn more about Amy's approach to leading a perpetually resource constrained, yet vital community organization. I really enjoyed learning more about Amy, and I hope that you do too. So let's get into it right now.

J

Justin Angle 01:43

Okay, so I'm here today with Amy Allison Thompson. Amy, thanks for coming on the podcast.

A

Amy Thompson 01:47

Thanks for having me.

J

Justin Angle 01:48

So before we get into it, I just want to know, how are you doing? This is, um, you know, a lot of our jobs have been made harder during COVID. But thinking about the sorts of jobs that have been made harder, yours is probably at or near the top of the list?

A

Amy Thompson 02:04

Yeah, that's a big question. Honestly, I think I'm doing pretty well, considering I think we did a really good job early on with the pandemic, looking towards other communities, who were already grappling with the pandemic, and were able to really learn from them and adopt a lot of the best practices that they were implementing at that time. So honestly, we've had a really rough year like everyone else, it's been extremely challenging. But at the same time, I am really proud of how we've handled the pandemic and of the processes that we've put into place to keep things from being much worse than they could have been, if that makes sense.

J

Justin Angle 02:43

Sure it does. And you use the word we in there a lot, I want to ask you about your staff and want to make sure you're holding up okay yourself.

A

Amy Thompson 02:52

You know, it's it's challenging from one day to the next, it does seem like this year has just

handed a lot to me in my leadership. In this role. I've been through some challenges at the Pov, we've been through a lot together as a team. But yes, I myself, I'm you know, definitely feeling pretty burnout. At this point, it's hard to constantly be waiting for the other shoe to drop in here. If we have another positive case, or something has happened, that that I need to respond to. So I will say that I'm definitely fatigued. And I'm really, really hoping that this vaccine will be the light at the end of the tunnel.

J

Justin Angle 03:27

Oh, gosh, it does give us something to hope for. In fact, since you brought it up, what are you hearing about how you and your staff and maybe guests at your facility? You know, where do you sort of stack up in the priority list for for access to vaccine.

A

Amy Thompson 03:42

I was lucky to actually be selected for the governor's vaccine implementation Planning Task Force. And so I actually don't know a ton to be honest at this moment, but one of the things I advocated for in our first meeting was to really strongly consider prioritizing homeless shelters. You know, it's really not a ton of people in our state. So we didn't take up a bunch of vaccines, but really working in a congregate setting like we do with an extremely vulnerable population of folks who are often older, and often with complex medical histories, and often don't have anywhere else to go right. Like that's the whole point of what we do. So I did ask that they strongly consider putting us up into that first phase, the staff and the folks that we serve, I'll be curious to see what they do with that. But the whole purpose of this task force and my role there is to advocate for the population that I work with, and to make sure that we're really thinking about what will be helpful in terms of the rollout and how things should be prioritized. So I'm hopeful that we can at least prioritize our staff at this time so we can ensure that we have a strong workforce that can remain in the building and to make sure that we can provide those essential services of food and shelter. So far, we have had to have larger scale quarantines, the first one, we had 22 staff out and the next we had 25 staff out. And those are pretty brutal in that we really were unsure of whether or not we would be able to remain open at all the first time we brought actually the national garden. So it is really, really important, especially in the winter that we remain open so people don't freeze to death. So, fingers crossed that they heard me, we have another meeting tomorrow, I'll be learning more about next steps. So I'm really hoping that we can be prioritized somewhere near the top, of course, I really want to see him, you know, medical personnel getting taken care of first, but I'm hoping we can be, you know, one of the first groups to get immunized.

J

Justin Angle 05:43

So lots to talk about today. Before we get into the the work you're currently doing at the Pov, I'd love to just kind of get into your background a little bit. I you know, I know you grew up in in Hannover, and your double graduate of the University of Montana. So thank you for sort of personally working towards solving our enrollment problem. But yeah, so studied psychology as an undergraduate and what kind of got you interested in that, and in helping people in need.

A

Amy Thompson 06:13

You know, I've always been, you know, as a, you know, youth growing up was always really interested in mental health. My mother is a nurse and just saw her working in that helping field, I think I've always just been drawn to helping people and wanting to be of service to kind of the greater community. So I think that early on was what, you know, kind of what I started with.

J

Justin Angle 06:36

And so you know, and that type of probably meant motivated your choice to continue from your undergraduate into into a graduate program in social work.

A

Amy Thompson 06:46

Yeah, so when I was actually receiving my bachelor's degree, in psychology, I started volunteering at the YWCA of Missoula, and really learned about being an advocate and domestic violence and all of that. And actually, during my training there, I learned a lot about social justice. And I didn't know what social justice was before that. But it turned out it was really in line with kind of how I felt about things and how I felt the world should be. And so that was really a lightbulb moment for me, and where I really decided that social work is actually what I should be pursuing, rather than psychology. And so that is why I actually decided to apply to get into the social work program was I really realized that social work was more in line with my personal values.

J

Justin Angle 07:30

Yeah, talk about social justice for a moment, because that's a term you sort of see used both positively and then sort of in a politically charged context. I'm thinking of the social justice warrior and some of the commentary on that sort of side of it. But what does social justice mean to you?

A

Amy Thompson 07:49

You know, social justice really means working to make sure that everyone has the same ability to access food and shelter and not be discriminated against. I think it's a big, you know, it's a big category of things. I think you're right, that can just be thrown around casually. But I think strongly that it's really about making sure that people have their basic needs met, and they're not being discriminated against for who they are as a person at the end of the day.

J

Justin Angle 08:16

Yeah. And so how does that kind of, you know, guide your work currently, but I'm thinking sort of as a student in the social workspace, is that kind of the guiding philosophy of a social work education?

A

Amy Thompson 08:30

Yeah, I think it's about fighting against injustice, working towards equality and equity.

J

Justin Angle 08:35

And so this is now let's, let's pivot to your work at the Pov. This is you know, you've been in the leadership role, about four years now. And but this is your second stint. So talk about talk about that you work to the left, and now we're back in the leadership role.

A

Amy Thompson 08:52

Yeah, so while I was getting my graduate degree in social work, I actually did my practicum, which is like an internship at the Poverello Center. So I started my work there didn't know a lot about the Pov, when I started, but was really interested in learning more about it and really fell in love with the work I really found a lot of personal connection to this work found that it really felt like a good fit for me to advocate for folks who didn't have anything, they didn't have a roof over their head or food to eat, and really understanding kind of larger systemic issues at play in our world that are kind of leading to some of these challenges that people are facing. I think it's really common for people to assume that a lot of the challenges people are facing are all based on their personal bad choices, but it's much more complex than that. So that's really where it all started for me. And so I spent three years at the Pov in that time, really just getting my feet under me learning more about social worker social work. I was a case manager working really closely with folks on getting them into housing, and connecting them with resources. And

then after that, I graduated from the social work program at the U and took an opportunity to work in mental health, I moved to Libby to develop an implement a behavioral health program within their community health center, which was a really cool opportunity as well, and did that for several years, became a clinician, I'm a licensed clinical social worker, as well. So I'm able to treat mental health issues. And so did that for a little while, then moved to Great Falls, my husband got into nursing school. And so I followed him to Great Falls for a couple of years with MSU. And then, at that time, continued to work as a mental health provider, then moved into a position with the National Association of Social Workers, which is a membership organization for social workers, that really focuses around advocacy and lobbying at the legislature and in Washington, DC for issues that social workers care about. So I did that for a while. And then this job came open at the Poverello Center for the executive director position. So I then applied for that not thinking I would get it, but really, really caring about this work. And I'd always hoped to become an executive director and thought it was a challenge that I was really interested in taking on.

J

Justin Angle 11:21

Yeah, I mean, you're I don't want to necessarily be disrespectful with this comment. But But you're relatively early career for a leadership role like that, at least I would have seen him sort of scanning other organizations in our community. Why do you think the organization chose you?

A

Amy Thompson 11:43

Great question. So I think that I have very naturally moved into leadership roles in any position I've been in, I think that that is a skill set of mine, I think I'm a very strong problem solver. I think that, honestly, I truly understood this work. And I understood what it would take to really tackle some of the challenges at the poverty law center faced, but I didn't know that I would have to do a ton of learning that there was a lot that I didn't know, the budget I was managing in my last job was \$500,000 was, you know, a fairly small budget to be moving over to the POV at a budget of, you know, essentially \$2.3 million was a big step. And you know, the path, I've learned a lot there have been there four and a half years in this role. And it's a constant learning process for me, and I've grown so much as a professional, even in things like, how to talk to the press, you know, I had no idea what I was doing with that when it first started. And now I'm much more comfortable having interview with you. And I'm getting a call from, you know, any of the news outlets in our community. So, yeah, I think when I took it on, I don't think I knew how much work it would be. But I also understood that it would be really challenging because the past is such an important part of our community, but it is also extremely challenging in so many ways.

J

Justin Angle 13:16

Now, let's talk about those challenges. I mean, I think that that homelessness is something that probably among our listenership, I would say that folks are interested in it, but they probably don't really understand the problem. Talk about the sort of state of play with homelessness in western Montana at this moment.

A

Amy Thompson 13:36

I would say it's all of course, exacerbated by the pandemic, what we were facing before the pandemic, though, really challenging. And now it's gotten much worse. I think the most important challenges to really highlight are the reasons that people face homelessness, which are huge, and that are often misunderstood by people in our community. Right. So I think, again, like I said before, people like to assume that it's really based on somebody's personal failings, and they're not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. But I think it's really important to remember that it's so much more complicated than that in Missoula. In terms of affordable housing. Right now, our affordable housing rate is at zero. And so people keep talking about like, why do we have all these homeless people in our community? It's because we don't have enough housing. That's the primary issue. Another issue that we're facing is that our wages are quite low in comparison to our housing prices, right? So there are a lot of really kind of basic things that I think we take for granted when we think about what is needed. In addition to that we have real challenges with access to mental health and substance abuse treatment. I think people often assume those are the only reasons people might be homeless. That is not the case. But those are certainly factors that we see every day, you know, several years ago Medicaid decided they didn't want to reimburse for case management. And we saw a marked increase in the number of people we were serving. Because of that one policy change, I think we saw at 25% increase in the number of people we were serving. And that was simply because people who were stably housed with a little bit of support, suddenly lost that support, and then they were unable to maintain their housing. So it's really a factor of those bigger kind of systemic challenges in our community, that kind of trickled down to what we struggle with at the Pov with folks who don't have anywhere to go and are having trouble accessing the treatment that they need, and that we often at the pop kind of get blamed for those things. But at the end of the day, we're actually just that safety net that's kind of catching those folks that are falling through this broken system.

J

Justin Angle 15:48

Yeah, let's talk about that. More specifically. So, you know, what is the role of the poverello Center in this kind of more systemic approach to trying to deal with homelessness?

A

Amy Thompson 16:01

I think that's a question that we ask ourselves a lot, and that we're trying to wrap our head around. At the end of the day, our mission is to provide food, shelter, help and hope to all who asked. But at the end of the day, during the pandemic, I would say, I keep asking myself, like, what is our focus? And to get us through times where we're dealing with a mass quarantine, I focus on we need to provide food and shelter. How do we do that? That is all we can do. When things are a little bit more, a little bit less stressful, I would say, my hope is for us to continue to do some amazing work we're doing in the community around building coalitions with other service providers in our community around our development of a coordinated entry system, which is this whole kind of complex process in our community where we brought together housing providers and service providers. And we're really working on prioritizing the most vulnerable folks in our community on getting them housed first, which is a different way to approach things than we had in the past, but is considered a best practice. So a lot of these kind of policy pieces in our community we've been really instrumental in and leaders in making that happen. So I think that's a huge part of what we do. I would also like us to think more broadly, as we have more capacity down the road. And in thinking about what are the bigger pieces we can advocate for to help, you know, we always are advocating for additional affordable housing and that kind of thing. But what else can we be doing to continue to advocate for that and build the case for the need for those things?

J

Justin Angle 17:33

Yeah, one of the things I've heard a colleague of yours, Susan, hey, Patrick, say is that the cure for homelessness is housing. And you sort of said that, indirectly, a few moments ago. And it sounds like you hear that and if for somebody that doesn't, you know, understand homelessness, or think about it very often that that that statement is sort of Stark, in a way like it's striking, striking, and it's obviousness and clarity. And how do you actually like, how do we do that, as a community? How do we create more housing for people?

A

Amy Thompson 18:08

That is a complicated question. I'm really glad that we have a department in our city now that is focused on Housing and Community Development. I think that's where it starts. And I think that's where we see other communities doing a better job with this. I think we also have some geographic chain challenges, excuse me, that I've continued to learn about in my role here, at the POV is understanding that Missoula is footprint is relatively small, and the areas we want to develop are pretty small as well, like, we don't want to

build housing up onto the side of our mountains, because we value that open space. And so I think it's really complicated. But I think it's about getting creative as a community and really policing our values in line with that. Because truly, Susan is right, the cure for homelessness is a home. And so that is absolutely one of the first steps in really starting to turn this around in our community.

J

Justin Angle 19:05

So one of the, you know, and I've heard you say this in other venues that there's a lot of misconceptions about about homelessness. And you know, I've read that in the poverty law center. Many of the guests are short term, they stay three nights or less, many are working, single job, multiple jobs. So you talk about some of that sort of misconceptions of homeless people in general.

A

Amy Thompson 19:31

Happy to that is one of the things that I think frustrate me the most is that, you know, just hearing about these myths constantly in our community, and they're from folks who really just don't know any better. They don't they haven't sat down and really taken the time to actually understand the causes of homelessness and what people are facing. But yes, um, you know, the the fact that people assume that somebody comes to stay at the Pov and they stay forever, that's certainly not the case our average length of stay is less than 30 days. And, you know, on average folks stay, a third of the folks that stay with us stay three nights or less like that is, you know, pretty. That's a pretty important stat. And that folks who are staying with us, many of them are working, many of them are holding multiple jobs, over 40% of the folks that are staying with us are working. We have folks who were sleeping all day at the park because they work night shift. And we have a ton of folks that are working, and they're hustling, and they're trying to save every penny. And when you think about in our community, what the cost is for an apartment to rent, and then you think about having to round up that first month and last month, and then also a deposit. It's just staggering. If you're working at a minimum wage job, it is almost impossible to round that up when you're trying to find housing. So I think there are a lot of myths that that tend to really get under my skin more than they maybe should. Another one that really frustrates me is when people assume that folks are homeless because they choose to be right. And I really get upset about that one, because I find that it maybe makes people feel more comfortable with homelessness, if they take that stance, right. So if you say that person chooses to be out there in the freezing cold, like they chose that, maybe it makes you feel better about it. But at the end of the day, the majority of people I talked to do not feel that way. And if you say I've got a place for you to what do you want to move in now they say absolutely. And people in the middle of the winter don't want to be living

outside in Montana. Like, that's just absurd. And even if you do talk to somebody who says like I'm choosing to live outside, I guarantee you that the majority of the time, if you actually dug into their story and learn a little bit more about them, they have lost their housing, they've been unable to maintain it for a variety of reasons could be around mental health could be around us not having the skills to understand how to do that they weren't raised to, to know how to do these things. They might be dealing with substance abuse issues, what have you. But they have lost housing so many times or thought that they had an opportunity and then lost it so many times that they begin to just say, Nope, I choose this life because saying the other kind of truth of that the fact that they've been unable to stay housed for a variety of reasons that are likely failures of our system in so many ways. It's just easier to say that I choose to be out here.

J

Justin Angle 22:32

A new angle is supported by first security bank, Blackfoot communications, and us College of Business. access to capital broadband and education are three ingredients in a community needs for success. Raging wildfires has scorched a record number of acres and killed leads to climb from those devastating wildfires. Last year, wildfire scorched a landmass nearly five times the size of Yellowstone National Park. It was the largest area burned since reliable records began. Fires are getting bigger and hotter and more devastating than ever before. What what all that fire means? And what to do about it depends on who you ask. Let's face it, the forest taking fire is really something not only a gift, us food, it's more more of a gift to the land. There will always be fear of fire. I know that and I don't pretend there won't be but in certain situations there shouldn't be I'm just an angle. And for the last couple years, I've been talking with scientists, scholars and firefighters themselves to hear their stories. You owe it to the guy that died. I wanted to figure out how did we get here? We're going to knock fire out of the landscape remember, only you can prevent forest fires It was a crazy ambition and where do we go it just knowledge is his freakin power. I'll talk about in a calm way but this is me hitting the panic button. Am I making any difference here with the science? That's what I wonder sometimes this is backfire a six part podcast series about what wildfire means for the West, our planet and our way of life. Coming February 23 Subscribe wherever you get your podcasts

J

Jeff Pettacord 24:25

Hey, this is Jeff Pettacord and you're listening to a new angle.

J

Justin Angle 24:31

You know in in that Amy you describe you know what sounds like a significant portion of the homeless population that is you know sort of at or near a threshold if you will maybe the threshold is a misconception but when you're talking about somebody comes in stays three nights and then moves on to something else or somebody who's who's who's working a job multiple jobs, whatever. It how do we create policies and practice that can get those people over the hump and get them into more secure housing arrangement?

A

Amy Thompson 25:06

Yeah, it's a good question in your rates, to really point out that there are kind of a couple of different groups of folks that we're working with, right? Like, I wouldn't break them into three categories, per se. But if we were to oversimplify this, you're right, those people who stay with us for three nights, those folks may have a lot of resources and options that they're able to jump right into. So that's kind of one group of people who they don't have to stay with us for long, they may be just waiting on one more paycheck to get into a place, they're in between places, or what have you. And those folks are more resourceful, they have more available to them, for whatever reason, and they can go, you know, then there is this kind of next group of people who have a few more challenges, you know, they may have \$0, to their name, they may have just lost their spouse. One of the more common reasons people experience homelessness is because of the death of a loved one, which is shocking to hear, but people don't realize that. So their wife died, and she managed all their finances, and you can't make heads or tails of that. And then you end up in a homeless shelter. That happens a lot. So there's that group of people who they really need a little bit more support to get back on their feet for whatever reason. And they may stay with us for a month or so. And then there's this other kind of smaller group of folks who stay with us for quite a bit longer and have higher needs, they may have mental health issues, substance abuse issues, that kind of thing. So it's really about thinking about what type of intervention does each of these kinds of groups of people need, like what are their true needs, and then really building a system that is developed to help those folks because at the end of the day, like, regardless of how you feel about people experiencing homelessness, fiscally, it's less expensive for people to be in housing, than it is for them to be in a homeless shelter, and living on the streets for a variety of reasons. So in terms of policy, you know, I can tell you about what I think we need and about what is working in other communities. But it's about a variety of types of housing, it's about having more affordable housing in general, it's about having more what's called permanent supportive housing. And that is where folks who need extra help would have that support kind of wraparound services to keep them housed. And those are the biggest things that we need in terms of policy.

J

Justin Angle 27:22

And so you've described, I mean, what you described there, in the course of this conversation, you've talked about the human condition of homelessness, and then you describe some of the broader kind of community benefits more of an economic argument. I'm sure you have to sort of oscillate between those two, depending on the constituency you're talking to. But let's talk about that economic piece, that sort of why is it important for a society? I mean, there's a bunch of reasons why it's important for society to create safe housing options and in feed its population and all all these sorts of basic needs. Make the economic argument because I think that's one that often people don't quite understand.

A

Amy Thompson 28:10

Yes, so folks can always look to million dollar Murray. I think that's a great study to look at to kind of start to wrap your head around what I'm talking about here. But yeah, tell us about million dollar Murray. I'm not familiar with that, essentially, million dollar Murray is a story about a man who lived on the streets. And they did some analysis over time of what it really costs for him to be homeless, and then what it costs for him to be housed and his kind of cost to the community, around a million dollars at the end of the day, over this period of time. When had he been in housing, it would have cost something like \$13,000. And so the idea being that things that we kind of take for granted living inside, which we do a lot, right. So if you think about it, when I think about a snapshot of an individual who's struggling in our community, who we might be serving, if they're living outside, and it's wintertime, say they're struggling with substance abuse issue or a mental health issue, they're getting the police called on a regular basis to them, maybe just for a welfare check, right? Like there's a guy on the sidewalk and he is in his wheelchair, he doesn't look good. I'm worried about him, I'm going to call 911 which is great. You know, it's it's I'm glad that people are looking out for each other. So, at the end of the day, if you add up those calls, or or perhaps he's too cold, he goes to the emergency room simply because he's so cold, he thinks he's gonna die. He's just going in trying to get inside somehow. So that's an emergency room visit. Again, those welfare checks, those emergency room visits, maybe you just need something to eat and he's not allowed at the shelter for whatever reason. All of these things add up all of these kind of costs with response for fire response from the police. Even shelter response, our homeless outreach team popping out, like all of those things, if you were to look at the kind of economic costs of caring for someone who's living outside who has different needs, because they're living outside frostbite, like maybe he has to have his foot amputated, because he lives outside, right? That's an extreme example. But that happens all the time in our community. So he has to have an amputation, the cost of that is high, and who's paying that he's not going to be able to pay that. Right, right. And that's another cost to our community. Whereas had he been

inside, he wouldn't have needed to go get warm in the emergency room, he probably wouldn't have had a welfare check, he wouldn't have needed a welfare check. Because he was inside, he wouldn't have gone to the ER for a sandwich, you wouldn't have had to go to the hospital for that. For his, you know, limbs freezing. And so at the end of the day, if you tally all those costs, that we kind of take for granted, it's much less expensive to have that person just live inside and have an apartment.

J

Justin Angle 31:02

Yeah, he sort of, you know, as I'm listening to your answer there, Amy, I'm thinking about like the fusion of this human and economic, you know, ways of thinking there. And it just makes me feel like this, this pandemic that we're living through, is almost like, engineered to exacerbate inequities in our society. I mean, if you look at the people that have, that have gained, the people and organizations that have that have done well, in the pandemic, you know, people that can easily work on zoom. Right, it's the stocks of companies like Amazon and apple and the giant tech firms that this sort of we're already on their way to global domination. And then the, you know, the on the other end, you know, adding the the sort of health complications to the population you're trying to serve. And, you know, the ways in which you're trying to serve them. It's just like, such a headwind.

A

Amy Thompson 32:02

Yeah, I think you're completely right. And it's overwhelming to think about, it's really disappointing. I guess, for lack of a better word, I felt like we were making some really good progress in our community around homelessness, right? We're getting some traction, we have some really good Coalition's built, we understand where we need to go. And this really did pull the rug out from underneath us. And to now, you know, have so many folks, I think they're going to be feeling the economic impacts of this for probably years to come. I would think, depending on how this all kind of plays out over the next little while. It's just going to make everything so much worse. And it feels sometimes like all that progress was burnout. And I know that that that is my burnout talking and that is me feeling really frustrated and disheartened by what's happening right now, but it is it's it's overwhelming. And we have to just pick up the pieces and just keep moving forward. But it is it's it's really inserting and I know that you know we've had a moratorium on, on rent, that will be coming up. At the end, I guess at the beginning of January that that will lift is the current plan. And I'm just so curious to see, you know, what our country is going to look like? And when some of these economic impacts fall out?

J

Justin Angle 33:24

Let's kind of maybe talk about that, I don't want to necessarily detail your burnout. But I'd love to know like, what does a win look like? For you even on the micro level? Like how do you kinda, you know, just just put on the shoes to go to work. And keep keep keep going in the fight? What gives you kind of daily motivation to press on.

A

Amy Thompson 33:49

So there are so many wins at the Pov. And I often say the pop is like a roller coaster, because we are dealing with so many people who are at so many different kind of phases and stages in where they're at with their own personal crisis and homelessness. And I like to point that out. I think people think homelessness, you know, it's easy to say that's just a homeless person. I like to remind people that they're just a person experiencing homelessness and being and being homeless is a crisis that somebody is going through. So when I think about a typical, you know, afternoon at the Pov. Lately, I've been spending a lot of time at the front desk at the Pov and that is because of our pandemic plan. I'm a staff member that works mostly from home because of my role, but if our direct care frontline staff are quarantined, then our process is that we pull folks from home into cover the shelter and to make sure that we're able to meet our basic mission of providing food and shelter. So right before Thanksgiving, we had a kind of a one of our larger quarantines with our with our team and I was working the front desk and the winds are so frequent, and they are sometimes so micro that an outsider might not understand why it's a win. Yeah, maybe tell us some stories or examples? Yeah. So, you know, I just think about, you know, the other day somebody came in, and you know, they've been living outside for a long time, and they just coming into shelter is a win. Yeah, the fact that we can get them into shelter is a big deal, because they don't have access to those services that they need to get connected. All of that. So just saying, like, I'd like to come into shelter right now is a huge win. I have one of our guests. The story always makes me pretty emotional. But we last Christmas, had one of our guests show up, he had been sober for about six months, and had been in his own place had secured his own work, and was working in construction, super kind guy, but has always struggled with a battle with alcoholism. And after a divorce, he had really fallen off the wagon. And he showed up at Christmas time, it was, well, it wasn't Christmas, it was in the fall. It was right after a flooding. That's when it was okay. Right after a big catastrophic flooding that we had. And our kitchen, we had gotten rid of like all of our food and spices out of the kitchen. And he showed up at the kitchen with a cart full of sugar, and flour, and salt. And he had spent I think, 100 and some dollars on that. And he said, I know that these are all things that you guys need in the kitchen to make the food taste good. And he said, You guys really took care of me when I was in some of my darkest times. And I'm really happy to be able to give back and to say thank you, and to help you when you guys need it the most. That is a

great story. And we have moments like that constantly. All the time, these little kindnesses that will just if they catch you at the right head, the wrong moments will really just make you cry. And that happen all the time. People are so grateful for what we have, I don't know how many times we have people walking in and saying, Hey, is Christy around, I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to let her know that three years ago, when I came in here, struggling with my sobriety, like that conversation that she had with me, like turned my life around.

J

Justin Angle 37:32

As you're describing that, it makes me think like you said, Your first example of a win was just sort of getting a person to the point where they come into shelter. And I suppose there's a whole host of of kind of challenges associated with getting a person to sort of take that step on the other end, getting a person to sort of who's maybe tried and failed and tried and failed. And to get that person to finally successfully adjust to being housed and to having a home like we'll talk about that process. And maybe what wins look like on that end of the spectrum.

A

Amy Thompson 38:10

We have a housing retention specialist, whose job is to work with folks, when they've recently become housed, to help them to stay housed. And it's kind of a funny thing to think about. For those of us who were lucky to have the skills and the family around us to teach you those things, right. Like, you know how to understand your lease and what's expected of you and how to do basic housekeeping in your home. I think those are things we all take for granted those skills. So our housing retention specialists work with folks on understanding some really basic stuff. But when you've been living outside, for a while, it's shockingly difficult to come inside again, and to learn how to live inside. So just as if we suddenly were expected to live outside and definitely tomorrow, there would be some real learning curves for us on like, how do we, you know, take care of our space? And how do we prepare food? And how do we stay warm and all of that. So that is one of the challenges that our housing retention specialists really help with help to educate, you know, these new folks into housing, like, how much can you have guests over? And the challenges of like, if your guests are people who are experiencing homelessness, how do you tell them, they can't stay with you, because we don't want you to jeopardize your housing. So it's super complicated, but we've seen some great, and again, these are folks who have been experiencing chronic homelessness. Now someone who has been, you know, in an apartment before, they're not going to need this kind of extra support. But those are the things that I think we sometimes take for granted when we think about, we'll just get them into housing. It's a little bit more complicated than that.

J

Justin Angle 39:58

Life changes are hard for for all of us. You know, it's it's so naive to think that somebody going through such a major life change, wouldn't experience struggles and probably struggles that, that you couldn't even think of if you've never been in that position. I kind of think, Amy, you know, you're probably constantly faced with trying to sort of maximize return on frustratingly scarce resources, like how do you? How do you make choices with shepherding the resources at your disposal to kind of create the best outcomes possible?

A

Amy Thompson 40:36

Great question. This is something I think I probably do without even really thinking about it. To be honest, I think that I am very skilled at problem solving. That's something that I've kind of identified as a strength of mine, especially in this role. We operate on such a shoestring budget at the Poverello Center, we definitely rely on the the generosity of our community to really do all of the work that we're able to do. But I think it absolutely, you know, those decisions I have to make all the time are so, so challenging, but I've gotten so used to them, you know, it's it's weighing the cost of that is weighing the human cost of it, how will that impact my staff? How will that impact our guests? What will that look like? How will that impact me? So I find that I'm constantly making those decisions. And I probably have a bit of a process that I don't even really like actually think about anymore. I just kind of follow that process to an extent. But yeah, I mean, those resources. I mean, I honestly can't imagine what it would be like to work in an office now where we don't have to mull over some of the smallest of costs, you know, staff asking for a post it you know, I know that sounds silly, but we are so resourceful that we don't, we don't order postage, we use the backside of paper that has been printed out and we cut it into fours, and we staple it and that's that staffs notepaper. So I think we're really used to operating in a very scarce resource environment, that is really challenging, but we're able to make the best of it, I really do believe that we are pretty, pretty scrappy, and pretty gritty ever above. And we can make a lot of nothing.

J

Justin Angle 42:25

And so within that, I mean, you describe your strength that problem solving, and there's got to be No, I mean, the problems coming over the transom at any given moment have to be sort of far more than then you have energy or time or resources to solve, how do you kind of make choices with your time about solving the immediate problem grinding through the day to day, but also pulling the lens back and thinking more strategically, not only about your organization, but sort of how you can weigh in on the policy dialogue or some of these, you know, you mentioned your participation in the Governor's Council, things like that, that are a kind of broader, systemic level work.

A

Amy Thompson 43:05

This is one of the biggest challenges I've faced in my leadership is trying to figure out how to constantly look up and to be strategic. And it's something I've been working on and, and trying to improve at all the time. Because the Pov is really, I mean, if you think about it, we are an organization serving people who are in crisis 100% of the time. And so our staff are constantly responding to crisis. And sometimes that crisis raises up to my level, where I have to help with that. So much of my work has been focused on trying to look up because I am constantly pulled into the crisis. And part of that is our capacity, we need more organizational capacity that will allow me to pass off some of this crisis, and to be able to continue to look up and be more strategic. I will say that it's something that I've been very aware of, and spend a lot more time now trying to build into my schedule, time to think and time to be strategic, which seems funny, but otherwise, my calendar would never relent, and provide me with that time. So it's really about kind of taking control of my time, and building in that time and accountability, to look up and to think about where we need to go next. And my hope always, and has been more of a focus for the past little while for me is is how do we move our organization from a place of crisis as an organization to a place of stability, we have dealt with some pretty major crises over the years that really have to do somewhat to our capacity and our challenges with that. And some of that is around staffing and really thinking about how do we pay our staff enough so we can be more stable and have less turnover? And so you know, things I've done strategically is I've recently been able to raise our staff wages, I was able to secure a grant from a family foundation that we work really closely with. I've been working with him for years, and was able to actually secure a \$250,000 grant to start raising our staff wages. So I would say this is probably one of my biggest challenges, Justin is to really learn to look up and be more strategic and look out the window rather than kind of looking at the crisis at hand.

J

Justin Angle 45:31

Did we did you know, that's just I love how you laid that out there, Amy. And we did an interview with George Dombroski year or so ago, and she said, time is the currency of leadership. And you know, you could Shepherd your time in so many ways, but I think, yeah, you described it trying to preserve time for you to think about how best to lead the organization. I mean, that is that is precious that that your job, but also something that's really hard to do, because the amount of things that can crowd out sort of time to think just feels like a luxury, given other challenges that before you. So keep trying to do that as best you can.

A

Amy Thompson 46:10

And I am getting better and better at it. Because I think I kept for a long time thinking like, I just don't have time I don't like it's not going to happen. And then I really had, you know, I really like reading about productivity and leadership and really identified like, no one is going to make this work for me. Like, I have to figure this out as soon as possible. And it's on fire. So for me, it's been a real learning process, and something I'm gonna have to continue to focus my efforts on. And I think it's hard for me because I am, you know, what I would describe as what I learned over time, was a servant leader, and really believing in being willing to jump in with a team when something's going wrong and help with it and work alongside them and not be the type of boss that just tells people what to do. And so it's really about finding that balance of making sure to be working alongside them, but also making that time to lead and to have that vision and that strategic time to know where I'm leading us. So it's been a definitely a process. And I just hope to keep working on that.

J

Justin Angle 47:17

Well, in the interest of making, helping you make better choices for your time, I should wrap this thing up, because you've got a lot more important things to do than be talking to me. But you know, as we do close, Amy, how can people? Well, I guess I have to kind of closing questions. One is this sort of straightforward? How can people learn more about your organization and help? But before that, how can people become more educated on the problem of homelessness? And what are what are some resources you would point people to to sort of understand the challenges better?

A

Amy Thompson 47:51

We have a lot of great content on our website, we have been working on that on how to really this is part of that capacity piece, but also strategy on how we better communicate with the community about what the problem is, I think for a long time, we weren't doing a great job of that. So we have started putting out a quarterly newsletter that I think is really helpful for people to hear these stories and understand like the real human kind of faces behind these challenges, but also some great facts in there about about the work that we're doing and about homelessness. So I think that's a great place to start. And those newsletters come out, basically quarterly, and we post them on our website, which is at [thepoverellocenter.org](http://thepoverellocenter.org). So that's, I think, a great place to start.

J

Justin Angle 48:36

Awesome. And within that you tell people how to find your organization as well. So you know, very efficient use of our remaining time there, Amy. Such a pleasure to get to know you and your approach to your work and learn about the important work of your organization. Thank you for all that you do, and for spending some of your time with us today. Thank you so much for having me. It was great to meet you.



### Justin Angle 49:03

Thanks for listening to a new angle. We really appreciate it. We're coming to you from Studio 49 the generous gift of us alums Michelle and Lauren Hanson. A new angle is presented by first security bank, Blackfoot communications and the University of Montana College of Business with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, and drum coffee. AJ Williams is our producer, BTO, Jeff Ement and John Wicks made our music. And Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. If you have any questions, suggestions, comments, insults, whatever, please email me at [anewangle@umontana.edu](mailto:anewangle@umontana.edu). If you liked what you heard, tell your friends about it. Thanks a lot. See you next time.