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### Service Learning Paper

The El Camino Homeless Organization (ECHO) shelter's mission is nobly driven by a desire to empower rather than just simply house and feed the homeless population. They take an intimate, committed approach in the provisioning of services by offering a more guaranteed stay and personal mentorship of clients than other shelters. Although ECHO hopes to define itself as inherently different from most other shelters, they still participate in similarly demeaning and somewhat dehumanizing practices. My experience at ECHO demonstrated how the shelter's paternalistic model focuses on safety at the *expense* of empowerment and the establishment of a true home for their clients.

ECHO's intense regulation of behavior promotes a constant feeling of foreignness for the clients. While it is a common tactic amongst shelters to construct policies and environments that remind the homeless that emergency housing is a temporary solution, ECHO has marketed their shelter as a home. Having a roof over your head does not provide one with the feeling of stability and security that comes with having a true home. The term "home" implies a space that preserves community, dignity, and identity.

ECHO's rules are legitimately necessary for maintaining a totally safe and protected environment, especially considering they house even more vulnerable populations like children. However, these restrictions become demeaning and disempowering when they are applied to every client despite whether it is their first day in the shelter or their sixth month. There is no loosening of rules as clients progressively show more responsible and trustworthy behavior, which leads to a lack of healthy incentives. Clients see no standards to rise to, but rather consequences to which they will fall if they break a rule. I spoke with clients that ranged from individuals receiving their master's degree online to workers who had careers of 30 plus years in the same field, which shows an obvious amount of accountability, professionalism, and responsibility that they do not have any chance to get rewarded for within ECHO. Inside ECHO, there are no steps a client can take to feel entitled to the services or treatment they are receiving, but rather they are approached with the same initial distrust and wariness as when they first walked in the door. Empowerment comes when one can have pride in distinguishing themselves from others because of clearly defined personal actions and habits, but ECHO clients are expected to remain satisfied, even grateful, under blanket, ceaseless monitoring for the duration of their stay.

I found it unnatural the way in which the chaperone-client relationship is structured under ECHO's model. The chaperone must always be in the act of giving or granting permission to the clients. How can clients feel a sense of ownership over their spaces or maintain dignity as they move through their "home" if every function of their living is set to a time-table and supervised? This creates a relationship of frustratingly

unnecessary dependence for the client. It is even more frustrating when this dependence is on a temporary chaperone who possesses questionable authority. ECHO's reliance on this relationship has fostered an environment for homeless people where they again feel that their situation is out of their control and even more so, it makes them interact with their home in an artificial way. For example, I had a client ask me in a tired, almost pleading way if they could take a shower 30 minutes after the allotted window because they had worked a 12-hour shift and came home late, which also had to be pre-approved. The fact that I had to *allow* him to take a shower, made it feel like basic necessities were being regarded as luxuries or as a privilege in their own home. This example also illuminates the unhuman-like expectations that are placed on the clients that we as a society do not even place on the housed population. It is unfair to hold the homeless to a standard of perfect punctuality or expect families with infants to not need food in their rooms. ECHO's rules are enforcing compulsory respect for a home that the clients have no real control over. Even worse, ECHO seems to ignore the vested interest every client has in seeing that the shelter is maintained and bettered, not only for themselves but also for their children.

ECHO places more trust in their chaperones than they do clients who have successfully passed their intensive screening process and who actively live in the shelter. ECHO eagerly grants an uncomfortably significant amount of authority to chaperones despite any relevant qualifications or extensive training. ECHO appears to trust the non-homeless to be suitable volunteers simply because of our status as not homeless. I found it to be deeply disempowering for a community to not have any

chance to regulate themselves or police their own home, but to instead have to watch strangers repeatedly re-enter the shelter and immediately be gifted a position of power without any hard work. Throughout my entire shift, I found myself having to ask the clients questions about whether I was doing my job properly because both I, and the veteran clients, recognize that they know the procedures of the shelter way more than I do. I was alarmed that as a first-time volunteer they were giving me the right to lock the doors if someone left without permission; they were giving me the right to exact punishment in the form of suspending an individual or even an entire family's safety for the night (the one-night out rule). ECHO spent more time prepping me on how to maintain order within the shelter, rather than how to consciously communicate with and support vulnerable individuals. During the training and tour of the facility, I was repeatedly told by the coordinator that "they are really just normal people, you'll see." However, by constructing a training that is oversaturated with emphasis on regulations, the volunteer is prepped to view the clients as *needing* these rules for reasons that are left to be speculated.

ECHO's physical environment reflects how a shelter can both adequately and appropriately serve the homeless on the surface while still subtly engaging in disempowerment. ECHO's facility is uniquely adapted to preserve the family unit. More specifically, it is constructed to preserve the privacy and proximity needed to sustain healthy, authentic parent-child relationships. However, the majority of the shelter, reserved for single men and women, has the air of an institution. The shelter's layout reveals that ECHO's conception of what true empowerment looks like is limited in

nature. ECHO validly wants to empower homeless people to reenter society by equipping them with the resources to find sustainable housing and employment opportunity. However, the construction of their physical environment shows that ECHO does not deem the establishment of community and development of healthy relationships as equally important for empowerment.

ECHO allocates only a small, corner room for communal space. Yet, because clients finish dinner at seven and lights are mandated to be turned off by half-past nine, there is no sufficient time allocated to establish the community needed to fill the community space. Many of the single adults I talked to slipped into homelessness because of medical situations that left them unable to work for a month or because they could not pay an unexpected car registration payment once. It seemed painfully apparent that if some of these individuals had familial or friend networks, that could temporarily support them, they most likely would not be in need of emergency services. Many of the families in ECHO are also single-parent headed households, which means these parents need adult conversation more than ever but are restricted by the rule that they must be supervising their children at all times. Conversation may not be as lucrative or “productive” of a practice for the homeless compared to searching for jobs or housing, but it is vital to boosting the mental health and stability required to be able to do the jobs that ECHO finds them successfully.

Critiquing a homeless shelter with limited resources and a non-profit budget felt wrong. Perhaps, I was expecting too much of ECHO and was hyper-focused on the flaws of a shelter that should instead be recognized for the clean, protected

environment that they have created for San Luis Obispo County's devastatingly underserved homeless population. However, if we hope to empower the homeless population to reenter "normal" society we must treat them with the same standards of dignity and humanity we do the housed population.