

## Ending Student Homelessness, Episode 1

Misty Blue ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to Ending Student Homelessness, a podcast that brings together folks who are committed to understanding and finding housing solutions. I am Misty Blue, a researcher at the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, and I've had the honor of interviewing a series of guests committed to this work.

([00:22](#)):

I hope you enjoy today's conversation with Rinal Ray, the interim Executive Director at Peoples Serving People. Rinal and her team are leaders in responding to the crisis of family homelessness and work to change systems to prevent the experience of family homelessness in Hennepin County, Minnesota. Last night, October 11th, 2020, there were 270 people in shelter at People Serving People. Rinal is a former Deputy Public Policy Director for the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, where she advanced the organization's policy agenda at a state and local level, trained leaders on nonprofit advocacy, advocacy, and led special legal projects for the statewide association. Rinal currently serves as a co-chair for the Voices and Choices Coalition for Children and is on the board of College Possible Minnesota. She teaches non-profit advocacy in the Masters in Advocacy in Political Leadership program at Metropolitan State University. Welcome. Thank you for joining me in this conversation today.

Rinal Ray ([01:28](#)):

Thanks for having me.

Misty Blue ([01:30](#)):

Can you please introduce yourselves to our listeners?

Rinal Ray ([01:32](#)):

Sure. My name is Rinal Ray. I use She/Her pronouns, and I am currently the Interim Executive Director at People Serving People.

Misty Blue ([01:44](#)):

Excellent. Um, could you please describe a little bit about your work that you do currently?

Rinal Ray ([01:50](#)):

Sure. Uh, People Serving People, we work with families experiencing homelessness in Minneapolis. We serve families all across Hennepin County in our shelter location in downtown. We have 99 shelter rooms and ten two bedroom permanent supportive housing units. In addition to shelter and meals, we provide wraparound services and support, including high quality early childhood education, onsite and in the community at our Center of Excellence.

Misty Blue ([02:21](#)):

And what led you to do this work?

Rinal Ray ([02:25](#)):

So you're asking me personally

Misty Blue ([02:27](#)):

For your personal journey, <laugh>, what led you up? What led you to this work?

Rinal Ray ([02:30](#)):

Got it. Um, for me, uh, I think, you know, my journey to this work at People Serving People, and this role is really about changing systems in addressing deep, systemic barriers for families like ours experiencing homelessness or families who have other challenges like it. It's about the systems. Our programs are amazing and they're awesome, and in moments they really feel like band-aids to deeper issues.

Misty Blue ([03:04](#)):

So a big broad question. What types of inequities present themselves in your work or for the people that you serve?

Rinal Ray ([03:12](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Uh, so our root cause analysis around what leads folks to, to homelessness, what leads families to homelessness is really around racism and structural racism. There's really no one particular way that folks enter the experience of homelessness. When you look at the things that families cite around why they ended up in shelter with us could be an eviction due to a lost job. It can be a medical emergency that led to the depletion of resources. It could be the lack of childcare when they had a job, or the lack of a job when they had childcare. And across all of these, all of these issues in ways that folks enter folks of color are more disproportionately affected, which of course then leads to more people of color, in particular black and native folks being impacted by homelessness.

Misty Blue ([04:09](#)):

So it really sounds like there's these critical moments or, you know, crises where people are dis their lives are disrupted, and that sort of can push people towards experiencing homelessness.

Rinal Ray ([04:21](#)):

Yeah, unfortunately, sometimes it is one thing that goes wrong. Like, there was a family recently who had purchased a car from another state and the tabs expired. They're in the process of getting new tabs, and they got a ticket, they couldn't pay for the ticket. And that like led to a snowball of things where they eventually were evicted from their home and entered into shelter with us. But it wasn't just the, like that their tabs were slow and coming, it's that they didn't have the resources and the safety net to be able to kind of ward off that one first thing.

Misty Blue ([05:06](#)):

Yeah, that's, that's so challenging because, yeah, a ticket can be so, feel so minor to some people, and then it can actually have huge consequences for other people. What is one action that you think should be taken to address these inequities?

Rinal Ray ([05:26](#)):

At People Serving People we are working towards putting our families' voices front and center in how we approach solutions. So our families and folks with lived experience of homelessness, they know where our systems get it wrong. They know where the loopholes are, they know where things take more time than they should be taking. And from our perspective, they're also key to the solution. They're key

to figuring out how to make things better, not just for themselves, but for everybody who will unfortunately walk down that path and journey.

Misty Blue (06:07):

Yeah. They know where they need support, it sounds like. And can, they can lead on that piece. So you and I are recording this podcast session or this podcast via Zoom, and that's all due to covid, and this is our Covid adaptation. Um, how has Covid impacted your work?

Rinal Ray (06:24):

Covid has changed everything <laugh> about how we do our work at People Serving People. All of our operations have changed, all of our programming has changed the ways that we connect as staff, the ways we connect with our families, all of that has changed. So for example, we no longer can serve meals in our dining hall because it's not safe for folks to congregate there. The impact of that has been that we are now delivering meals three times a day to family and guest rooms. So we're packaging things up, transporting it up to the rooms. Before we had like 6,900 volunteers every year come in and help us run programming and operations. Those volunteers are gone right now for safety reasons. And so there is an increased pressure on our staff to deliver meals and other things that we would've had volunteer help with. Our expenses have gone up around securing PPE and all of these operational changes in early education. We're operating at half capacity and sometimes below half capacity, so we can keep our kids and our teachers and ultimately our families safe. So while everything has changed about how we work, who we are at the core, um, and the work that we do remains the same, and we're, we're really happy that we get to keep doing this work, keep being a bit of a safe harbor amidst dual pandemics.

Misty Blue (08:03):

Um, is there any way that Covid has impacted the way that homelessness is manifesting or in that you're seeing in terms of, um, how people experiencing homelessness maybe are experiencing it differently? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>?

Rinal Ray (08:17):

Yeah, that's a great question. So early on in the Pandemic, we, we were noticing that our families, um, you know, they were taking the pandemic seriously, right? And in some ways, and we felt that our role was really to equip folks with information so that they can make the best choices for themselves and their families as possible. So we did a lot of education early on, but while our families were taking it seriously, it wasn't the most immediate crisis in their lives, like it was for many other folks. They like their first and the primary crisis was their housing crisis, and then their childcare crisis, and then their transportation crisis. All of that led them to, to being with us in the first place. And this was just one more thing on top of the things that were already going on. I think as the pandemic has continued, partially and because of the, the good community education that's happening and the efforts that we've had internally within Shelter, where we've been able to keep folks healthy and safe, for the most part, we've had maybe a handful of families that have gotten sick.

(09:32):

and we've been doing a really good job at doing a lot of transmission mitigation, which has been good.

Misty Blue (09:39):

It's great that amid all of the changes that we're all having to do, that people are still, that you're able to still keep people safe and sheltered and

Rinal Ray ([09:52](#)):

Can I say something more on that question? Yep. So we're also experiencing fewer families in shelter with us right now in the middle of the pandemic. Our sense is that the evictions moratorium has allowed families to stay in their apartments or in their homes. Um, and that's great. Like if families can stay safely housed when there is a pandemic, that is a good thing. We are concerned about what happens once the pandemic ends and evictions start processing through our court system. We do expect to see an increase in families experiencing homelessness at that point, unless we have some really, really strong public policy solutions that come to the fourth, uh, that prevent that from happening.

Misty Blue ([10:42](#)):

Thank you. And, um, just a for me, a clarifying question. The evictions moratorium, is that something that was put into place in the spring, or could you say a little bit more about that for me and our listeners?

Rinal Ray ([10:54](#)):

Sure. Uh, so the governor and Lieutenant Governor, when they issued their stay-at-home order in the spring, I don't remember the date exactly. Part of that stay-at-home order was a moratorium on evictions. Um, and that meant that if for somebody impacted by the pandemic that might lose their job, or for whatever reason, was unable to pay their rent, they could not be evicted. Um, I think from a, from a public health and policy perspective, the state saw the benefit of having folks stay where they were in place. So every time the peacetime emergency order is extended, the evictions moratorium is also extended. Um, yes. Is that helpful?

Misty Blue ([11:41](#)):

Thank you. Super helpful. Thank you. In your opinion, after the moratorium ends, how do we keep people at home?

Rinal Ray ([11:48](#)):

That is the big question I think that folks in state government and policy makers need to decide on. Um, there's been a benefit arguably to, to folks being able to stay at home, uh, on a public health perspective. Um, I think there's been some good steps. A hundred million was released to help, uh, with rent relief earlier this year, like last month or so. Um, and that is a really wonderful start. And a hundred million dollars, sadly, is just not enough, uh, for rental relief as a remedy, uh, to preventing a huge wave of evictions. So we need to see more state resources. We need to see more creative, um, more creative policy ideas come to the fore. There needs to be a strong partnership with landlords. Um, if there is mortgage relief for landlords, that needs to be tied to rent relief for tenants as well. Uh, there's a ton of other organizations that are working on this more, more deeply than, than we are. Um, but it's definitely policy area that we have been following.

Misty Blue ([13:01](#)):

Recently in the Twin Cities. We have had more people experiencing homelessness while being unsheltered. Could you share a little bit more about what you see?

Rinal Ray ([13:10](#)):

Absolutely. So you're right. We have seen more of our unhoused neighbors, um, in places like parks or next to highways and encampments around town. Covid and the encampments have made homelessness more visible than it's been in the past. Um, but it's been an issue for us for a while, and what I appreciate is that more folks who are interested in asking hard questions of government and local government about why this is happening and, and what we can do.

Misty Blue ([13:43](#)):

Do you see, uh, ways that people who are neighbors to these encampments, do you see ways that people can support?

Rinal Ray ([13:52](#)):

I think there's a, there are a ton of mutual aid, uh, pages up over the, all over the place. And I think that there, like the Safe Haven movement has been working with encampments. Um, the She encampment, um, it like is specifically for families. I'm looking for like a piece of paper where I had more information, um, is specifically for families. And so there are material resources that I think neighbors can get to encampments. Uh, but I think it's also figuring out who are the, the organizers on the ground at the encampments, um, and what is it that they're asking for, and how can neighbors then support and amplify that message.

Misty Blue ([14:35](#)):

Where does your work intersect with student homelessness?

Rinal Ray ([14:40](#)):

So we run a family shelter, and part of how we define family is that there has to be a caregiver and a child. Um, so we have folks who are pregnant in shelter with us, but most of our population is children. So two-thirds of the folks in shelter with us at any time are children. And the average age of kids with us is six. Um, so many of our kids are small. Um, and many of our kids are school-aged kids. I can get the numbers for you if that's something you're interested in. Um, like even last night's numbers, if you wanna know that. So, most of the, the children in shelter with us are students. They're students either in their formative early education years, or they are students in K-12 in our public schools, mostly in Minneapolis public schools.

Misty Blue ([15:32](#)):

And what are some of the unique challenges as you see it for these students,

Rinal Ray ([15:37](#)):

Uh, for these students in particular during a pandemic, I think the distance learning is difficult. We're doing a whole lot right now to support students in their distance learning. We have additional staff that's really dedicated to working with kids one-on-one, um, and supporting older students as well in their distance learning. Um, so technology is, can be a barrier. We 're working really hard to provide, um, all the tech that kids need right now while they're with us. And so has MPS, Minneapolis Public Schools has worked really hard at that, but every now and again, our internet goes out, um, and then they can't get on the class, right? And so I know that that is also gonna be a barrier for students who are

doubled up or experiencing housing instability outside of a former shelter situation. Um, social emotional, I think is a, is another area of challenge.

(16:37):

Um, students count on their peers and learn from their peers and is a motivating factor to be with their peers in school, especially when experiencing homelessness. Like part of whole idea of McKinney-Vento in keeping kids at their homeschool was that that was a place of stability amid all of the instability that they're experiencing in homelessness. Uh, so now kids don't have that opportunity right now anyway, in distance learning to go and be physically at their homeschool with their peers and having somewhat of a, like I'm using air quotes, normal experience, uh, that's been, that's been taken away in this moment. Um, and I think another difference is the ability of our parents and our caregivers to, to support our students in the ways that I think many of our parents and caregivers want to support their children. Our parents are like definitely some of the fiercest advocates for their families that I've ever met. Um, and it's something I really admire about them, and they just have a whole lot going on. Um, and things that they need to attend to so that they can get their families into a position of greater stability. And what that means is, in the moment, um, often older kids are helping younger kids and may not be focusing on the things that they need to be focusing on. Um, or parents just can't, can't provide the kind of support that other parents may be able to provide to their kids.

Misty Blue (18:14):

Yeah. Sounds like there's a lot of layers or a lot of ways that the, these parents and these families can be additionally supported. Um, if you could envision or reimagine a system that addresses some of these, these challenges, what would be key to ending student homelessness?

Rinal Ray (18:34):

One of the things that we're working with at People Serving People is the recognition that our students, these students come with grownups. And that we need to think about a whole family unit and make sure that we're designing program and policy, um, that has a whole family in mind. And that is not just about the kids and it's not just about the grownups. Um, but we're as a system, are supporting family cohesiveness as a protective factor to move through the instability of homelessness. I also think that there's a thing about, um, systems, schools, organizations, ability to hear advocacy from those most directly impacted, right? Like there's a mindset thing that needs to shift and happen around who we, um, like systems, organizations, staff, folks think is capable of determining what is okay, right? Like there's our, like social services, human services are set up in such a patronizing, patriarch, you know, patronizing way, um, where we hold all the power and often our families, students certainly don't, and they're subject to our whim.

(20:05):

So there is like, so we need to like work on developing the capacity that when a mom is sitting across from me and she is really upset and escalated and knows what she needs to have happen so she can support her kid. Like, I gotta be able to hear that it's not gonna sound the way it would sound if one of my colleagues was doing it. And it's okay. Like she's still advocating, she's still making a point. The communication is different. Um, but we, we seem to turn it into something that's more about her than it is about the way we are set up to work with one another. Uh, and that's not fair to our families and it does a complete disservice to our, our students.

Misty Blue (20:49):

Yeah. Yeah. We need to be better equipped to hold those, those those tough conversations. Big, big, obviously big feelings and um, and move someone, help someone move through those mm-hmm. <affirmative> to take it macro, I'm curious if you see a way for people who are in positions of power, people who are policy makers and who have the ability to change policy change processes, change the way that we do things. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, to have better avenues to hear people,

Rinal Ray ([21:28](#)):

Policy makers, folks and state agencies and local government. People in organizational leadership need to hear people like they've gotta do the work themselves to prepare themselves to actually hear and receive what folks are telling them and then work at that intentionally to build relationships that are meaningful and authentic where you are sharing power where there is reciprocity, um, to get to a different kind of a result. And there is something about creating, uh, that proximity to, in some, in some moments like pain and heartbreak and tough stories and big emotions, uh, that is really important to opening avenues for new ideas to emerge. Um, or like that kind of proximity allows there to be a different kind of emergence. Instead of somebody who's a policy expert ideating about the policy solution. You're doing this work together. And of course that will yield a different result for, for not only families impacted but our community as a whole.

Misty Blue ([22:40](#)):

Thank you. So I also see my work as a researcher, as someone who can lift voices or be sort of a platform to share information to those who have the ability to change policy. How do you see researchers also sharing that power, also hearing people?

Rinal Ray ([23:03](#)):

Yeah, I think researchers play a really important role in helping share the story and often play a critical role in helping, um, tell the story through data and like formal research that's collected. Uh, in some ways if like research can be used to amplify what folks are already saying or what is known anecdotally, like to me that is the best way to utilize research. Um, and that is the best way for researchers to come up behind and to support community. Um, cuz as sad as it is, like that's how our systems work, right? Like when I go to the legislature and I am like working, lobbying on a piece of policy, I know I need to have a really clear articulation of my issue. I know I need to have my data, I know I need to have my stories and I know I need to have my ask. Um, and so that the data and stories pieces, uh, to me are really interwoven. If I can share data in a storytelling way or if I can share a story that is backed up by data that makes the thing that I'm asking for more compelling and allows a policy maker to hear it perhaps a little bit differently, uh, than if I was just coming straight with data, coming straight with story.

Misty Blue ([24:26](#)):

Awesome. Um, so I just have one final question. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, where can our listeners find out more about you and your work?

Rinal Ray ([24:34](#)):

Yeah. Listeners can find out more about People Serving People at it's really simple. [www.peopleservingpeople.org](http://www.peopleservingpeople.org)

Misty Blue ([24:43](#)):

This is so great. I really appreciate your time.

Rinal Ray ([24:46](#)):

Good, thanks.

Misty Blue ([24:48](#)):

Thank you for listening to the Ending Student Homelessness podcast. This podcast was recorded on Anishinabe and Dakota ancestral homelands. Indigenous people have historically and paradoxically faced homelessness at disproportionate rates in the state of Minnesota. Please visit our podcast page to learn about ways you can support local organizations committed to addressing this issue. This special podcast series has been created by the Homework, Starts With Home Research Partnership. We are a collaborative state university school community project designed to integrate multisystem administrative data and analyze it in order to produce and disseminate high quality evidence pertinent to addressing the state and national challenge of student homelessness.