7 Practical Ideas for Compassionate Communities
by Shannan Stoll

It's not hard to bring a little more equality into each others' lives.

Kerry Morrison interviews homeless veteran John Watkins in the Hollywood Hills. Hollywood was one of the first communities to join the 100,000 Homes Campaign. Watkins has been provided with housing. Photo by Rudy Salinas at Path.

1. 100,000 homes so far

Teams of volunteers across the country hit the streets early in the morning to put a name and a face to the long-term homeless in their communities. The volunteers started canvassing at 4 a.m., combing the streets to gather names, photographs, and stories of the people sleeping there. They searched for the people at the highest risk of dying from being on the streets. Once they identified the most vulnerable people, they offered them a home.

That was the 100,000 Homes campaign’s approach to eliminating homelessness in communities across the country for the past four years, and it worked. In June, one month before their deadline, campaign organizer Community Solutions announced that its more than 230 partnering cities, counties, and states had surpassed the goal of placing 100,000 people in homes in just four years. It was a bold goal. In the traditional housing placement system, it often takes more than a year to work through the multiple agencies, treatments, and counseling requirements to secure a home. The process is intended to ensure that government subsidies for housing go to the people best prepared to receive them. The 100,000 Homes campaign flipped this paradigm by offering housing first. Once housed, people received supportive services to deal with substance abuse, mental illness, and joblessness. The housing first method is quicker, and it’s successful. Studies show that two years after receiving supportive housing for free, more than 80 percent of people were still living in a home instead of on the street.

Community Solutions isn’t stopping with 100,000 homes. Next January, the organization will launch Zero: 2016. This new national campaign will target the elimination of all chronic and military veteran homelessness, one home at a time. It’s another bold goal, and they just might do it.

Photo by the All-Nite Images.

2. Suddenly debt free

When 80-year-old Shirley Logsdon went into the hospital for a back injury, she came out with nearly $1,000 in debt that she would never be able to pay. For a year and a half, she received persistent phone calls from debt collectors. Then Logsdon received a letter from Rolling Jubilee. “You no longer owe the balance of this debt,” it read. “It is gone, a gift with no strings attached.”

Letters like the one Logsdon received were sent to 2,693 people last November, when Rolling Jubilee bought and forgave $13.5 million in personal debt. A newly released study by the Urban Institute says about 77 million people in the United States have debt that is subject to collections—often debt that was incurred to pay for basic needs. That’s one of the reasons the Occupy Wall Street group Strike Debt formed the Rolling Jubilee project. “We believe that no one should have to go into debt for the basic things in our lives, like healthcare, housing, and education,” the group says. Since forming in November 2012, Rolling Jubilee has bought nearly $15 million of debt for just $400,000 on the secondary debt market, where lenders sell unpaid bills to collectors for just pennies on the dollar. Thousands of individual donations averaging just $40 have paid for these debt buys. It’s a bailout for the people, funded by the people.

3. Stuff of good neighbors

Freecycle and Craigslist give new life to old stuff by facilitating porch pickups for everything from free lamps and scrap wood to cans of food close to their expiration dates. That kind of stuff is posted on Buy Nothing’s local Facebook pages too, but the group is about a lot more than just stuff. It’s about the people and stories behind the stuff and the porch meetings between neighbors.

One year after it began, the Buy Nothing Project has grown into a social media movement with more than 225 local groups across the country and the world. Rebecca Rockefeller

cofounded the first Buy Nothing group on Bainbridge Island, Wash., and says the project is helping communities discover their abundance. “There’s enough stuff to go around,” she says, “and the way we learn that is by getting to know our neighbors, asking for what we need, and giving what we have. Everyone has something to give.” People give away their dusty household goods, but they also give childcare, cooking classes, and garden produce. People ask for what they need, too: One neighbor asks for a piece of land to bury a beloved pet, another for a late-night store run to pick up medicine.

Photo by Mark Peterson / Redux.

4. The city that pays for college

In 2005, residents of the declining rust-belt city of Kalamazoo, Mich., received some unbelievably good news: A new program supported by private donors would fund Kalamazoo kids’ college tuition up to 100 percent at any of Michigan’s public colleges and universities. The Kalamazoo Promise would be available to any student enrolled in a Kalamazoo public school since the ninth grade. It was the most comprehensive scholarship program in the entire country.

Nearly a decade later, the place-based scholarship program has inspired more than 30 similar programs across the United States. While not all communities have donors with pockets deep enough to fund a program like the Kalamazoo Promise, the program is demonstrating how radical investment in youth can transform a struggling community and have a huge impact on its most vulnerable populations. Since 2005, young families have returned to the city, and enrollment in the school district has increased 24 percent. The number of minority students taking AP courses has increased 300 percent. The city has spent more money on the district than ever before—a lot more. Test scores have improved, and GPAs have increased, most notably among black students. The list of achievements goes on, and just this June, the program announced its expansion to include tuition coverage at 15 of Michigan’s private liberal arts colleges. “There is no wholly literate urban community in the United States,” says district superintendent Michael Rice. “We aim to be the first.”

Photo by O+.

5. Medical care for a song

Without a steady paycheck, retirement package, or health care, independent artists and musicians often have to sacrifice health and security for their art. In Kingston, N.Y., a unique arts festival is helping change that by bringing neighbors together to care for one another.

At the O+ Festival, art and music are exchanged for fillings, physical therapy, routine physician's exams, and other health services. The festival began when a Kingston dentist wondered aloud to his artist friend if he could get a band he liked from Brooklyn to play for free dental care. He could, it turned out, and with the help of a few friends in the arts, his idea grew into the first O+ Festival in 2010. At the fourth annual O+ last year, providers at the festival pop-up clinic offered 99 dental appointments and 350 hours of health services for the 80 artists and musicians who performed and presented during the three-day festival. "Building a community around O+ speaks to the simple idea of compassion and being part of a community," says Joe Concra, a painter who co-founded the festival. "Because we've become accustomed to huge companies providing everything we need, we forget to look to our neighbors to see what they can offer."

Photo by Masbia Photo.

6. The finest dining

Masbia serves up dignity with dinner to hundreds of hungry New Yorkers every day. Instead of long lines and a tedious intake process, diners at this soup kitchen are greeted by a friendly host and ushered to a private table for a delicious three-course kosher meal. No questions, just healthy food. Original artwork decorates the walls, the atmosphere is cozy, and the menu is prepared using fresh ingredients donated by farmers markets and CSAs. Nearly all the kitchen and wait staff are volunteers.

"It's a restaurant with no cash register," says executive director Alexander Rapaport. When Rapaport began Masbia, his goal was to provide kosher food in a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere. "Doing it with dignity means people will come," he says, and he's right. Every day, more than 500 people come to Masbia's three locations. This year alone, the growing organization expects to serve more than 1 million meals.

Photo by IMAS.

7. Immigrant Mutual Aid

Before state-funded programs and large insurance companies, many people turned to community networks for services like health care, unemployment aid, and education. In mutual aid societies, people pooled resources to pay the salary of a community doctor, outfit a schoolhouse, or give financial and emotional support to members who were sick or out of work. Today, mutual aid remains an important alternative for people with limited or no access to state-funded services. Cooperatively run pre-K schools, lending circles for low-income groups, and even some housing associations fill in the gaps left by state services. Mutual aid societies are still particularly relevant among immigrant communities.

In Chicago, home to some 3,000 Iraqi refugees, the Iraqi Mutual Aid Society is Iraqi immigrants helping each other adjust to American society. Language and vocational classes provide practical skills while social and cultural events like poetry contests and concerts help refugees remain connected to their unique culture and community. Resources include free and reduced-cost child care, and the group's Immigration Legal Services Program provides help with naturalization petitions. According to iraqimutualaid.org, the region expects at least 800 more refugees annually over the next several years.