



## Contributors

### Hilary Silver: Shutting shelter put homeless at risk

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THE CLOSURE of the Welcome Arnold shelter, in Cranston, on March 15 to make way for a new State Police headquarters is not the first time that the homeless of Rhode Island have been displaced. The Providence “renaissance” included clearing downtown of “undesirable elements.”

In 1988, when the Providence Bonanza Bus Station’s downtown site was sold to the Rhode Island Convention Center Authority and the main bus station was moved to the outskirts of town, the local homeless lost a habitual, warm, safe haven. Indeed, there is still talk of moving the city bus station out of downtown and privatizing the public space of Kennedy Plaza.

In 2004, Traveler’s Aid (now Crossroads) vacated its downtown Union Street location to move into the rehabilitated YMCA building on the South Side of the city. This shifted the homeless to the “other” side of Route 95. Now the loss of the state’s largest shelter of “last resort,” a refuge that some of the most vulnerable and hard-to-house citizens of Rhode Island call home, will again force the homeless to relocate. They must pick up and start over again in one of five smaller shelters, or land back on the streets.

Residential instability has plagued the lives of most Welcome Arnold residents. While a few have lived there since the mid-1990s, many come and go, only to return again. The length of stay varies with seasonal employment, unreliable relationships, health emergencies and substance-abuse problems. Some residents are runaways, fleeing domestic abuse, parental disapproval or family dissolution. Quite a few are unemployed jobseekers or newly hired workers whose savings — and rent deposits — were spent before they could find work.

Others are emotional wrecks, coping through alcohol or narcotics with personal tragedies and the loss of loved ones. There are physically and mentally ill people whose chronic problems tax the patience of landlords and neighbors, leading to evictions. Many move in and out of institutions — hospitals, prisons, rehab and other stricter shelters. With lives of uncertainty, the homeless are constantly in flux.

Yet the dedicated staff of Welcome Arnold and the many friendships among residents there provided the stability, security and caring that these folks needed. They saw the shelter as a safety net, a place that would accept them after everyone else turned them away. The drunks, the psychotics, the developmentally disabled — shunned and misunderstood — could find a nourishing meal, a clean bed, and, however temporarily, human contact.

Welcome Arnold was also home to well-educated people who fell on hard times and needed time to get back on their feet. That such a heterogeneous population could co-exist and cooperate in one place is truly remarkable.

To be sure, smaller shelters can offer services and support more effectively and personally than a large shelter with overtaxed staff. The dispersal of 95 Welcome Arnold residents to Amos House, Crossroads, House of Hope, Oasis and the Urban League shelters will give residents safe, stable places to leave their belongings and will let service providers tailor interventions to individual needs. Smaller shelters linked to transitional housing provide a continuum of care that helps the homeless move towards self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, shutting any shelter disrupts the social ties and networks crucial to the survival of the homeless. Because there are many more individuals cycling through the shelter than there are beds on any given night, the closing of Welcome Arnold is putting some people at risk of living on the far more dangerous streets.

Advocates for the homeless of Rhode Island estimate that there is a need for about 100 more shelter beds to accommodate everyone who relies on Welcome Arnold during a reasonable period. Governor Carcieri's pledge to "ensure that every individual using that facility is accommodated before construction begins" is an admirable one. In essence, it means we must build more affordable housing, as the recently passed Question 9 on the Rhode Island ballot confirmed. After all, even if we don't build it, the homeless will come. They have nowhere else to go.

Hilary Silver is associate professor of sociology and urban studies at Brown University. She and her students have been interviewing the last residents of Welcome Arnold. Her recent short film, *South Side: The Gains and Strains of Diversity*, has recently aired on Rhode Island Public Television.