

**Why Good Works decided to no longer participate in the State's requirement of Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) as a condition of their grant; and as a result, were no longer eligible to receive funding to operate our shelter (The Timothy House).**

Good Works began in 1981 and was funded entirely by private donations, and the volunteer efforts of Keith and Darlene Wasserman. In 1986, Good Works applied for and received a State grant through the Department of Health. That funding provided for the operations of shelters in Ohio. Several years later, the State shifted its funding agency to The Ohio Department of Development. Today, that agency is called Ohio Development Services.

In 2014, we made a difficult decision to stop receiving a State grant for the Good Works Timothy House through Ohio Development Services. We had been receiving funding since 1986 (about 28 years). The decision was very difficult because the State was providing around \$64,000.00 a year to Good Works to fund The Timothy House, which was about 1/3 of the total costs to operate each year. But I have no regrets. What they were asking us to do to receive their grant funding was (in my view) unethical and bordered on being immoral.

My training in mental health grounded me in the value of confidentiality. While there are times to break from confidentiality (someone stating they were intending to harm themselves, or another person for example), we believe that the information provided to us by those who stay in our shelter is a trust. Vulnerable people trust us with their lives (and their stories), and we must pledge to keep what they share with us confidential. The only circumstances that allows us to share their very personal information would be their written permission (we call this a release of information) or by a court order.

In the early 2000s, first the Federal Government and then the State Government (Ohio Development Services, Office of Housing and Community Partnerships) decided that people experiencing homelessness should be asked to voluntarily provide a lot of detailed, personal and confidential information to them; and that those of us who care for adults and children experiencing homelessness were required to upload this personal data to their "safe and secure" website provided to us through the State's contract agency, The Coalition on Housing and Homelessness or COHHIO. We agreed, as a condition of receiving their grant, to ask those we were serving at the Timothy House to allow us to provide information to the State, but only with their written permission.

Most of our residents said no-thank-you and a few said it would be fine. As the years went by we were contacted several times by COHHIO agency staff asking us to enforce their policies. They informed us that we were not doing enough to persuade our residents to participate voluntarily. On several occasions we were told that the numbers of those "voluntarily" participating were too low and that we needed to learn how to obtain this information from those who decided to not participate. This felt very manipulative, and we all felt very discouraged by this mandate. Then, in 2014, the Ohio Development Services Agency changed their grant agreements to require all

shelters who receive state and federal funds to up-load personal and confidential information from their residents on to the State's "safe and secure" (HMIS) website, with or without their consent. \*

This was the point that we decided we had to take a step of faith and stop receiving State funds. In my view, our government was instructing us to violate the civil rights of those who asked for our help as a condition of receiving their funding. Oddly enough, domestic violence shelters are exempt from the law. They can continue to receive State dollars even though they do not provide the information the State was requiring from us.\*\*

There is more to this story that I have not expressed, including my attempted overnight stay at a Columbus area shelter and what I discovered about how they inform their residents about how their confidential information is provided to the State without their consent; and, my visit alongside our elected State representative to the Ohio Development Services officials and staff.

All these years later.... I still believe we made the right decision. Thank you, each of you for reading this and for your support for Good Works. I am grateful.

- \* At no time did anyone from the Office of Housing and Community Partnerships or COHHIO ever answer the questions we had about who has access to this data. This was very troubling to us who care deeply about the safety of the people we serve and their high degree of vulnerability.
- \*\* In my view, the State allowed Domestic Violence Shelters to be exempt based on the personal information of their clients becoming available to law enforcement agencies, the courts, and others which could endanger the lives of those the shelter serves. The irony is that those we serve share equal risks but are not exempt because their privacy is not valued in the same way.