

## Homelessness: A Space Odyssey

Every week during the school year, I assume a pseudonym and speak with strangers who might also be masking their identity. I work at a crisis hotline in Chicago. My job is to guide panicked callers through urgent, emotional situations. The work is electrifying, and the rewarding feeling that comes with witnessing the impact of my actions is addictive.

Generally, I am the only teenager working at the center. At first, I felt intimidated—afraid I wasn't up to the challenge. But after finishing the 40+ hours of training, and being approved to take my first live call solo, I realized the callers don't know or care about my age. By design, they have no idea who I am. Our connection is human.

Call center liners are intensely passionate people, driven with the zeal of altruism. We work intensely and sometimes we laugh. All of us know the post office number by heart, because a bizarre number of people mistakenly call looking for it. We all know that, at least once a month, one of us will take a call from a guy who yells "Spaghetti!" and then hangs up – a welcome interlude from the human tragedies we too often encounter. We must memorize the protocol for reporting child abuse. So, sometimes we cry together.

Last December, I was on duty at the center when a call led to an epiphany about how to locate more and better shelters for the homeless, a problem I've long wanted to help solve. She was 16, just like me, but she already had two kids. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment with four sisters and an abusive father. That night, she had escaped from a violent episode at home. It was hailing outside, and with nowhere else to go, she dialed the hotline. I called every shelter within a fifty-mile radius of her rural Wyoming town—eight in all. Some didn't answer. Some were full. Some couldn't take her without parental consent and ID. None could give her what she needed: sanctuary.

She would have to fend for herself or return to her abusive household.

After exhausting all options, I consulted the other volunteers. Nothing. "That's just the way it goes sometimes," one said. "Sadly," another agreed.

How could this be "the way it goes" in America? In a country infamous for excess, we have more than enough of everything, including safe places for shelter. We don't need more spaces. We need a better system to match the needy with the space. I began calling shelters to inquire about their organization system and policies. I learned there is no unifying national database of available beds in every shelter: this must be developed.

We humans have learned much about ourselves through the development of technology. The success of companies like Uber and AirBnB prove we are willing to share space with strangers. Why can't the same approach be applied to solving homelessness? Uber hasn't created more space; it has created a system to utilize available space. I would like to devise a system that would match those who need a bed with those who have one. Moreover, this system could match those in need with spaces such as libraries, community centers, religious buildings, and warehouses; even without beds, they can provide warmth and safety. Let's include private residences—even a few volunteers would make a difference. A screening process would ensure the safety of the individual as well as the homeowner, and a rating system would encourage respect and best practices throughout.

It's unacceptable that almost half a million people cannot find shelter on any given night in our

country. This issue is tragic, but solvable. In college and beyond, I will seek the people, resources, and knowledge to help make this plan a reality. Picking up the phone is one thing, but truly answering the call is quite another.

[650]