

The Social Benefits of Furniture Banks

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My task today is to discuss with you the Social Benefits of Furniture Banks. In the Abstract Title and Summary section of your conference materials I promised that you would learn what furniture banks do and how their simple mission of providing furniture to people without it impacts their stability in myriad ways.

So what do furniture banks do? Simply put, they collect gently used furniture from people who want to get rid of it without putting into a landfill or foisting it off on their young adult children and give this furniture to people who need it. Usually these are folks coming out of homelessness. They may be women and children fleeing domestic violence, families or single people who have lost their jobs and been evicted from their apartments or had their houses foreclosed upon. Or they might be people who've been through a fire or a flood and lost all their furniture that way.

Furniture banks range in size and sophistication from a jumble of stuff in the corner of a church basement, to warehouses and shops of various sizes and levels of service. Some only have furniture; others have furniture, plus lamps, small appliances, linens and towels, pots and pans and tableware. Some rely completely on community donations, while others receive donations from furniture manufacturers and retailers, as well as from families and individuals. But no matter what the bank's size or sophistication is, for the people in need who are served by them, their impact is enormous.

Research has shown us that the provision of good quality used furnishings has a direct and dramatic impact on job retention and improvement, performance in school, and self-esteem. It's also shown that furnishings play a major role in helping people to maintain a permanent, independent living situation after a period of homelessness by providing them with the sense of ownership and stability that comes from having a furnished home to return to after a day at work or school. Furniture provision, the research also reports, increases skills and income because a healthy, comfortable home environment provides an essential foundation for success on the job and in school. And these things, in turn, provide the family with a sense of home and a feeling of stability.

The research is absolutely correct. But a moment ago I said that the impact of furniture banks on the families who receive furniture from them is enormous, so let's think about that impact in human, rather than academic, terms now. Imagine a woman who's taken her kids and fled a domestic abuser. She probably went first to a shelter. She may even have gone to a shelter in a whole new city where she hoped her abuser would never find them. She and the kids were safe there, although it probably wasn't really comfy and cosy. Shelters seldom are.

But she stuck it out and got the counseling and help she and the kids needed to get their lives back on track. She found a job and saved her money until she had the first month's rent and security deposit on a house or apartment she could afford. She also saved enough to get the water and electricity turned on and enough for a week's worth of groceries. Now, she's found

an apartment and she's ready to move in. Hurray!!!

That first day she picks up the kids after work from the day care center and school and they all head home –HOME!!-- together. She turns the key in the lock, opens the door, and in they go. But... inside, her place is pretty much empty. After saving enough money to move in, there was nothing left for furniture. So the family is going to sleep, eat, do homework, read... in short, live their lives on the floor for awhile. Think about that for just a moment.

Imagine serving dinner on the floor **every** night, not just on a special picnic night in front of the fireplace. Imagine helping your kids with their homework on the floor and then putting them down to sleep on the floor. Every night. Imagine yourself going to bed on a hard floor night after night and then having to get up, probably a little achy and still pretty tired, to get breakfast and feed your children on the floor--your tired, grumpy children who have to start their school day out of sorts.

This scenario plays out in houses and apartments all over the country, every single day: families faced with eating, living, and sleeping on the floor. Again. That's not a happy thought. But here is a **very** happy thought...a furniture bank can make this empty place a real home, complete with beds for all of them, a couch, a table and chairs, a bureau, maybe even a couple of lamps and side tables. Then, little by little, she can add to their furnishings and maybe replace a few pieces as time goes by. But even without the extras that will come in the future, right now they're okay. They have the basics and they're both safe now **and** comfortable.

Now let's think about those basic furnishings for a few minutes. That table and chairs set is way more than just a place to eat: the kids can sit there to do their homework while she's getting dinner ready. Then they'll have a place to sit down together to eat and laugh and talk about their days. After dinner, they'll have a place to finish homework or maybe play a game together. They'll build memories together around that table, telling stories, having giggle fits, hashing out problems or figuring out how to meet challenges.

No, dinner tables aren't just places to eat. When we think about them carefully, we realize that they're also places where family life is lived in lots of different ways. In my family, it's where we took turns giving thanks for some happy thing that happened to each of us that day and sometimes sharing some of the unhappy things, too. As a family we got to cheer for those good things and that made the happy things even better. And we could commiserate about the the unhappy things, maybe making them just a little less painful. The dining room table was also where we shared memorable holiday meals with extended family and friends, where we laughed and told stories, and sang songs and had marvelous, often pretty raucous, times.

The same can be said of couches. They're not really simple things either. They're where we sit to watch TV, but they're also places where we take lovely naps on a Sunday afternoon and where we snuggle up and read together, or tell stories. Some of my children's earliest happy memories are of sitting on the couch together reading stories about Winnie the Pooh and his friends, about Horton, who heard a Who, and—one of our kids' favorites--Harry the Dirty Dog. Later we read “chapter books” together on the couch, including the Hobbit and all three of the Lord of the Ring books ...twice!

The couch was where my English nanna told my brother and me stories about learning to ride her bicycle on a Roman road in Yorkshire –after more than a thousand years it was still

smooth enough for a little girl to learn to ride her bike on it...imagine!! (And imagine Nanna ever being a little girl learning to ride her bike... astounding!) And it was where my grandfather told us family stories about our forebears in northern New England in the late 1600's and early 1700's. The couch was where we learned much of our family history... and where our kids did as well. I hope our hypothetical mother spends some time snuggling on the couch, reading to her kids and telling stories.

Beds: they're not so simple either, are they? Our hypothetical mother will tuck the kids into theirs later this evening. Maybe they'll read another story or sing a few songs, or have a little conversation about something before she turns out the light. She'll climb into her own bed later that evening. Maybe she'll read for awhile before she goes to sleep or maybe she'll fall into dreams immediately. Either way, that welcoming bed at the end of a long busy day is her refuge and she loves climbing into it. Even if the beds aren't outfitted with expensive temperpedic or sleep number mattresses, the whole family will certainly sleep far better in them than they would if they had to spend the night on the floor. The kids will awake in the morning, rested and energized and ready to go to school. She'll be rested and refreshed and ready tackle another day at work... and another day of being a mom. A good night's sleep is the cornerstone of success in all areas of life.

So these are the social impacts of furniture banks. They make empty places into homes where previously homeless families can comfortably go about the business of becoming contributing members of our communities. They decrease the chances of such families becoming homeless again by helping them feel secure in their new lives and capable of meeting the challenges that life presents to all of us. It's far more difficult to walk away from a furnished home that gives one a sense of pride and achievement than it is to abandon an empty place where no one could sleep well or be comfortable doing much of anything.

So let's hear it for furniture banks, for the people who run them, the people who donate to them, and especially for the people who rebuild their lives with their help.