



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

Frankfort, KY- Beaming over her unsweetened latte in a warmly-lit coffee shop, Hannah Emberton smiles as she discusses her position at the Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky. It's obvious she's happy with the work she does, though the nature of it is not always as pleasant as she is. "Not being able to find affordable housing is the worst. Every day, you just know is another day and there's gonna be none. There is no such thing as affordable housing at this point." Since July of 2021, Hannah has worked as the Bluegrass ESG Case Manager at HHCK - she has an ever growing stack of clients, all whom she gets to know on an up-close, fairly intimate basis. "My clients - you know - they're amazing. The first thing I say to them when they're down on their luck, feeling bad about themselves, is I remind them 'hey - you have made it this far. You have literally been living outside and surviving. You kept yourself alive and healthy enough to get this far, to my office, to this meeting. You have a lot of resilience and strength to be proud of - let's focus on that.'" When asked what her favorite part of the job is, Hannah reflected for a minute, and with the same, warm smile answered "I like being able to see things happen. A client I met with yesterday has had a whole life of homelessness and housing insecurity starting when he was about 18. Now we're getting him into an apartment - it's going to be soon, hopefully - and he is going to be able to start the healing process, recovering from that time in his life. To get to be a part of that happening is really great, seeing things come together like this."



photo: katherine mueller



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Hannah has an educational background and degree in social work. Before coming to HHCK, she spent time as an employee at a behavioral health hospital, and served with AmeriCorps at a school specializing in social-emotional learning. Add in the real-life, real-time psychology practice of waiting tables, and Hannah's background makes her a perfect fit for assisting clients who have experienced the trauma of homelessness and housing insecurity. "It's a real trauma. People have PTSD from being homeless, and we don't talk about that enough." She continued, "it's a crisis. You're in survival mode 24/7 - imagine your heart beating fast, really fast, for a really long time. Days. Weeks. Years of your heart pounding. The whole entire time you're experiencing homelessness, that's what your body remembers. It's psychological, physical trauma." Wraparound services that HHCK offers with certain programs they administer, including the programs and cases Hannah manages, are crucial to client success. "When we talk about funding, including funding for client support - not just the voucher assignment part - is so important. Making sure all these advocacy and assistance organizations like ours have enough staff to provide the services thoroughly, that's the best use of resources. It's important to find housing, provide payment for housing, but it's just as important to help keep people motivated and encouraged, to . . . provide those wraparound case management services, too. People stay housed when they have that support, especially as they get started. It all circles back to people exiting that traumatic time in their lives. They need a little extra help - who wouldn't?"

A common problem HHCK and similar organizations face is finding landlords willing to rent to their clients. Housing choice vouchers (frequently referred to as Section 8) often, and unfairly, carry a bad rap, and with it, the families and individuals who use them to help pay their rent. "Why would you not want to rent to someone when . . . you know you're going to get paid? I run into that a lot with the landlords, they say they're afraid of what will happen to their properties renting to Section 8 clients. The risk of renting to anyone is the same; it's the worst kind of stereotype and so many of them [landlords] just start right out of the gate with the 'problematic Section 8 tenant' attitude." Section 8 funds are paid directly to the landlord through HHCK - the financial risk is slim, yet landlord participation remains low. "We've got a guy who has rented to us - to our clients - before, and has been really happy with the turnout. He said he wants to, plans to, buy a house in every county we work with", Hannah exclaimed, laughing. "I wish they were all so positive about us. The dehumanization of people who experience homelessness is wild", she added. "There's no reason why they [landlords] shouldn't want to rent to us. We have so many safety measures put in place that if something were to happen, you're gonna get covered, and we'll [HHCK] pay for it. You know you're gonna get paid." Frustration showing on her face, and in her tone, Hannah went on, "It's not hard. It's the bare minimum you can do - you're guaranteed to get paid; the deposit, the rent, all of it. Guaranteed rent money, but that fear of the Section 8 stigma takes over and people who own rental properties just can't see past it. Just...be more empathetic. It's easy math. You're gonna get paid, and we're all human."



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On the day of our interview, I spent the workday with her in an attempt to pick up the ebb and flow of her busy day. She lives with her brother and two dogs, Misha and Lula (the latter of which she proudly showed off photos of) and commutes to Frankfort from Lexington two days a week. She shares a tidy office space in Frankfort with a coworker, Nataleé, and they take turns on their office “in days” to minimize direct contact, as well as offer quiet space to make client calls - many of which can be repeated, and often quite long. Hannah was in and out multiple times during the day conducting home visits with some of her clients. Her genuine affection for her clients shows, and is reciprocated. As she returned from a scheduled home visit with one client, she opened her hand - “look at this”, she chuckled. “[name redacted] found this somewhere - probably a parking lot, I don’t know - and saved it for me because it matches one of my tattoos.” In her hand was a metallic gold colored brooch in the shape of a neat triangle, with a pin on the back. “It matches this one”, and held it in her palm to compare it to the matching tattoo on the inside of one of her fingers. When pressed about how much care she must show her clients to be remembered with such a thoughtful gift, Hannah quietly replied, “Oh I don’t know. Everybody needs a place to go to be successful, I’m just here to help them get to that place. Sometimes you can’t get there alone.”



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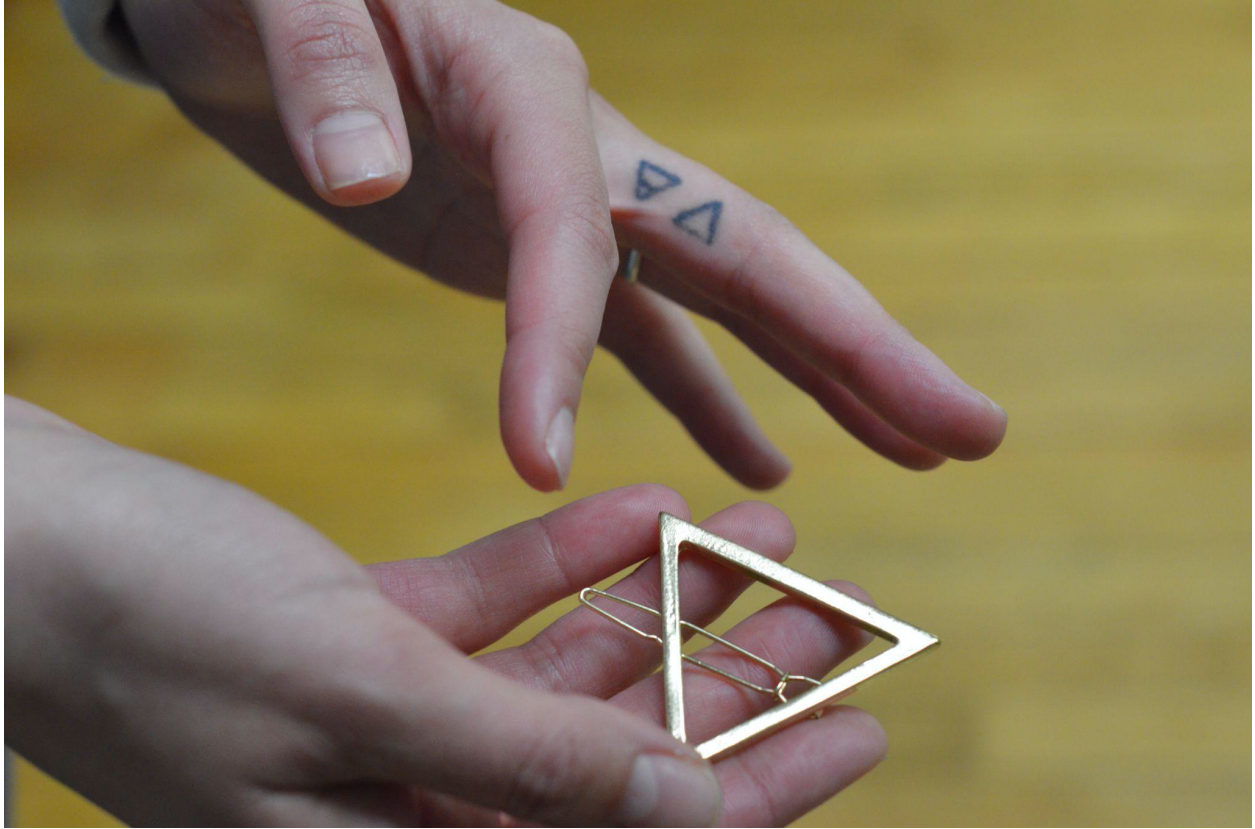


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