

# Urban Studies

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR



*Outgoing program director Dietrich Neumann teaches an engaging virtual lecture for his Contemporary Architecture course*

I am writing my final contribution to our newsletter as Director of Urban Studies on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend 2020. It is a gloriously sunny day, in that typical New England fashion – not too hot and not too cold either. This is when our beautiful campus always looks best, and normally teems with excited seniors and their families, thousands of alumni roaming the grounds to reminisce about their time here decades ago. Paper lanterns would adorn the main green, tables and the dancefloor be set up, noises from the big band’s sound check would drift over to my beautiful office in Maxcy Hall.

This year, the campus is eerily quiet; populated merely by a few dog walkers and a handful of students sitting in the grass – everyone else is back home somewhere in the US and in many countries around the world.

For those of us who share a particularly intense love of cities (which certainly includes all our faculty and students), it has always been clear that understanding cities holds the key to finding solutions to some of our most urgent issues, be they climate change or population growth. Now, Urban Studies will be at the center of debates about how to make cities safer in the face of pandemics. How will increased work from home affect traffic and public transport, urban density and all the pleasures that can come with it? Will urban crowds – celebrated by

Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin - be a thing of the past? The built-in interdisciplinarity of our field and our program has equipped our students with the tools and creativity to address these issues. And I look forward to seeing their efforts and successes in the coming years.

As my time as director comes to a close, I am thinking back to some of my favorite memories of the past 6 years – among them the celebratory farewell graffiti on the façade of the old Urban Studies building, the monthly dinners with our honors students, our bus tours into Providence and countless conversations with my colleagues and our amazing manager, Meredith Paine, whose kindness, generosity of spirit and skillful diplomacy have held the program together for the past 8 years.

I could not be happier than to know the program in the very good hands of my successor, Prof. Sandy Zipp, who will take over as director on July 1. In all our faculty meetings over the years, we have always profited greatly from Sandy’s good judgment, his energy, intelligence and deep commitment to the program. I look forward to seeing the program grow and flourish under Sandy’s leadership.

*-Dietrich Neumann*

## FROM THE EDITOR



*Urban Studies senior Ella Comberg outside of Maxcy Hall on graduation day*

As Professor Neumann’s note underscores, the department is undergoing a time of transition as we adapt to the limitations on learning and city life put in place by Covid-19, and as we welcome our new director, Sandy Zipp.

I will forgo the traditional language of resiliency for a moment (although the members of our program are all certainly hardy adapters to their circumstances) and instead underscore all that we have lost, as a program and a discipline. For me, the time I spent each week for nearly every semester of college discussing history, policy, equity, and culture in the Maxcy seminar room—occasionally enjoying leftover treats from some morning meeting (or, as Professor Azar called it, the “snack club”)—was a core element of my liberal arts education at Brown. I was delighted that these conversations could continue virtually, but, as we all know, it is not the same to speak to a screen as it is to chat in the corridors of Maxcy or on a pathway to the Main Green.

I’ve read countless accounts of all we have lost in terms of social interaction, but I think we have also lost so much in terms of space. Our experiences of places are now confined and our experiences of the city all the more freeing in turn. I would give anything to sit at Coffee Exchange with my friends, bike across a packed pedestrian bridge, or dance with you

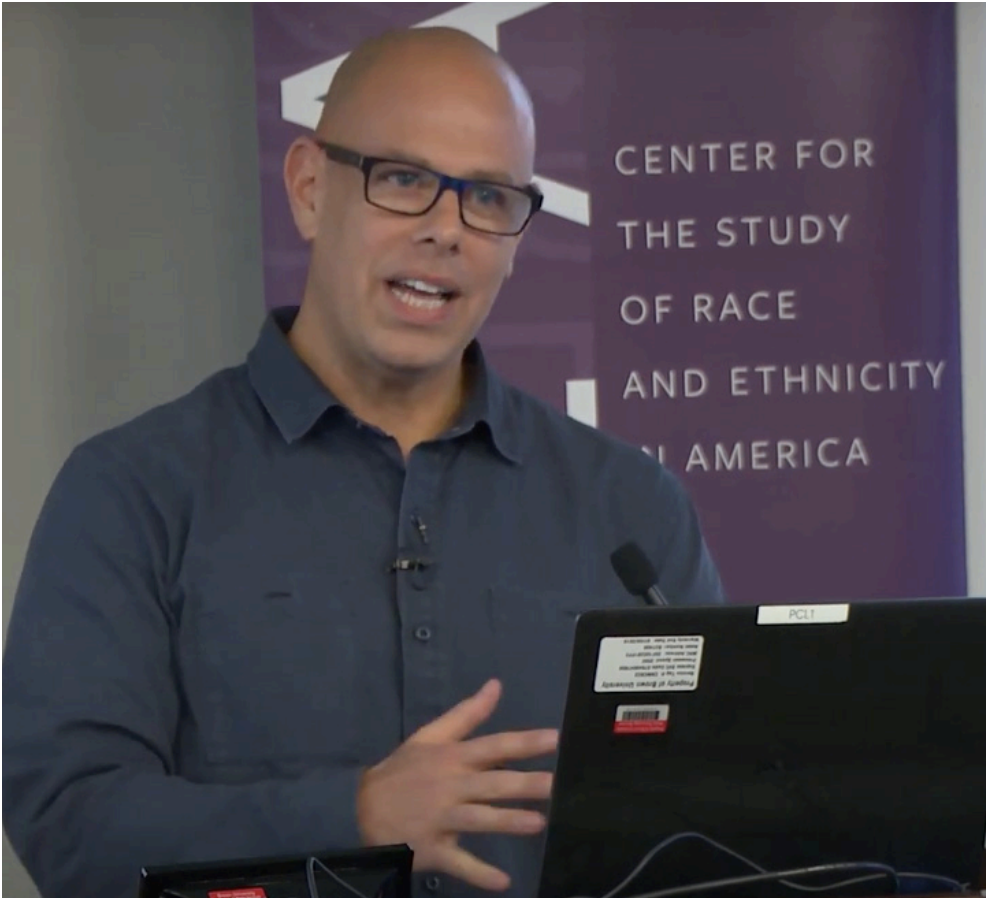
all at Campus Dance. More than anything, I fear that the small business institutions that defined my time in college—the minimart, Bagel Gourmet, Coffee Exchange (again), Tea in Sahara, Madeira’s—will be no more following the economic crisis this pandemic has wrought.

But I do not mean for this note to be despairing, as it perhaps has been to this point. Instead, I hope that as students of cities, we can recognize the wave of changes our urban spaces are undergoing—and especially their turn to become less equitable—as all the more reason to fight for better, more equal, more sustainable, more vibrant, and less homogenized places. I say with no sarcasm that Urban Studies has taught me to fight for a different and better future. Perhaps no one has taught me this as well as Professor Sandy Zipp, whose articulate, precise, and occasionally (and appropriately) despairing perspective underscores the absolute necessity to fight to improve our cities and institutions. I’m sure he will bring steadfast leadership and wonderful change to the program, and I look forward to watching from afar.

Congratulations to the class of 2020 and see you all on the green in 2021!

*-Ella Comberg '20*

# THE BLOCH BUMP: Prof. Returns to Campus



Former Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow and Presidential Diversity Fellow Stefano Bloch taught so many students in his URBN 1230 course, “Crime and the City”—usually 200-400 each semester—that Urban Studies experienced an uptick in concentrators. Prof. Neumann termed the trend the “Bloch bump” in his opening remarks as Professor Bloch, who is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona’s School of Geography & Development, returned to Brown to speak about his new book, *Going All City: Struggle and Survival in LA’s Graffiti Subculture*. At the talk in February, Professor Bloch recalled both his time at Brown and his time as a prolific graffiti writer in Los Angeles in the 1990s, pointing to the tension between the two spaces—a theme that defines much of Bloch’s work.

*Going All City*, Bloch’s auto-ethnography, traces many of the stories and themes he relayed to students in “Crime and the City.” In particular, Bloch’s highlighted the balance between over-policing or over-romanticization of graffiti writing, the tricky ethics of tracing back—and fact-checking—one’s own life, and the necessity of subculture for survival.

Bloch’s book is out now from University of Chicago Press.

# THESIS WRITERS COMPLETE PROJECTS

## Emily Winston: “Developing a “Neighborhood” at Hudson Yards: A Case Study of Manhattan’s Evolving Far West Side”

This thesis explores the real estate changes to the far west side of Manhattan through a historical lens, tracing the evolution from a manufacturing and industrial area to one dominated by technology firms, businesses, and luxury residences. It looks at the changes to the far west side under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, which included rezoning West Chelsea, supporting the development of the High Line, and bidding to host the Summer 2012 Olympics on the West Side Yards. This thesis aims to illustrate that Hudson Yards magnifies the rezoning and redevelopment efforts of Mayor Bloomberg’s administration. By analyzing the features, organization, architecture, and financing of Hudson Yards, this thesis argues that, at least initially, Hudson Yards is not able to create an appealing and accessible neighborhood New York needs. The development does not pay homage to the history of the area, nor does it integrate within the built fabric of Manhattan. Rather, it is an engineered “city within a city” that is devoid of necessary facilities and affordable amenities and truly public spaces. Ultimately, Hudson Yards is a megaproject whose financial considerations trump societal and design concerns.



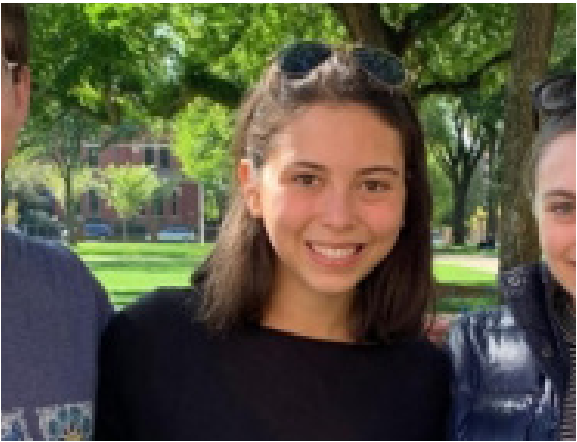
## Hilary Ho: “Staying True: An Ethnographic Study of the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project (RIHAP)”

My thesis is an ethnographic case study on a grassroots organization called the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project (RIHAP), a group comprising members with lived experience of homelessness. RIHAP’s claim to fame was its success in homeless advocacy in Rhode Island. Most significantly, RIHAP spearheaded the drafting and passing of the mainland United States’ first ever Homeless Bill of Rights in 2012. However, this element of community organizing has faltered in recent years. My curiosity about how the group has changed over time became the subject of my senior thesis. My thesis revolved around the research question, “how can grassroots advocacy groups stay true to themselves within a larger nonprofit ecosystem?” The thesis explores the tensions that groups like RIHAP face in the attempt to fulfil their missions while simultaneously working within a nonprofit system that is not, and was never intended to be, built for them. In writing this thesis, I think through why it is that some groups deviate from their missions, and whether or not this is necessarily a negative thing. Ultimately, I argue that RIHAP has not “stayed true” to itself if we measure this by how much the group has stuck to its original mission. However, I also posit that this is not the only way to measure RIHAP’s success.



## Adrienne Wolff: “The River of Dreams: The Promise of Potential Along the Detroit Riverfront from 1970 to the Present”

Adrienne’s thesis considered the urban history of Detroit’s changing riverfront. She considered multiple stakeholders in this contested territory, which remains a source of tumult for the city today.



# THE IDEALIST: Prof. Zipp's new book



*Ella Comberg: You're an urban and cultural historian. How does The Idealist relate to your work in urban history?*

Sandy Zipp: In my first book, *Manhattan Projects*, which is about urban renewal in New York, I did a bunch of research on the building of the headquarters of the United Nations and the coming of the United Nations to New York City, and in doing so I found my way into a bunch of writing about the United Nations and internationalism during and just after World War II that I found to be unexpected. There was this thread of popular internationalism of liberal and mainstream-right writers who had a fairly large audience who were fascinated and hopeful about internationalism and saw it as a possible way to transform American life. And so I got interested in some of these figures and in many ways, Wendell Willkie was the most influential of them. And so I thought it would be interesting to try to write a book about his trip and his book that would illuminate the politics and culture of this era. And would show this era from a slightly different perspective.

*EC: Do you see Willkie's perspective as iconoclastic or indicative of broader political trends in the 1940s?*

SZ: This book is about Wendell Willkie but it's also using Wendell Willkie as a kind of vehicle to understand a set of problems, concerns, and dilemmas that shaped the political culture of 1940s America and the post-war planning that was going on around World War II, and generally the history of what we might call the history of globalization—the history of thinking and understanding the world at a global scale. I like to think of it as healing the world at a global scale, in the sense that Willkie is a figure who asked Americans to feel the world to feel that they were connected to the rest of the world. So in a way, he's absolutely representative of a particular current during this period, in that there were lots and lots of people, mainstream people like him—middle of the road, liberals, Protestant religious folks—all the way over to left-wing, trade unionists, African American intellectuals and activists, anti-imperialists, folks like this who were concerned to understand the interconnectedness of the world to understand the problem of empire and race in world culture in that period, world civilization in that period. So he's part of this

larger ferment. What is interesting and iconoclastic about Willkie is the way that he brought particular strands of that, that milieu into national mainstream light with his trip and his book, *One World*. So he brought a particularly race-conscious critique of empire which was mostly germane to African-American political figures in this period into mainstream debates in a way that it almost never been there before. And really, in some ways hasn't been there since, with the possible exception of the 1960s. And to some extent to actually, today. But for much of American history, these kinds of questions have largely been banished from mainstream public life. And for a brief moment, in the middle of the 1940s, Willkie brought these things up to the surface, because he was so popular, because 36 million people listened to his radio report after his trip around the world. More than four million people and many more besides that in other formats, read *One World*. So he's what I call a popular internationalist. But one who, because he's sort of an iconoclastic figure and a charismatic figure, took it upon himself to disrupt some of the regular conventions of political life, wanted to push some of these less appreciated themes into the public debate.

*EC: Who is he popularizing from? What kind of discourse is he drawing from?*

SZ: So, on the one hand, he's connected to a long standing tradition of American internationalists, particularly going back to Woodrow Wilson and the founding of the League of Nations. Wilson is sort of one of the heroes of his youth. He turns twenty in 1912, so right as Wilson is rising to national prominence. And he's a big backer of the League of Nations. But over the course of the '30s and '40s, he also deepens his convictions and connections to the African-American civil rights movement. And by the late '30s, he becomes a friend and ally of Walter White, who was the head of NAACP. So conventionally White is seen as a kind of middle of the road political figure in black politics in this era, you know, certainly less radical and challenging of the status quo and a whole host of other folks like A. Philip Randolph or W.E.B. Du Bois or Paul Robeson who are publicly visible, but his politics were in some sense quite similar to them. And even in the mainstream liberal part of American African-American politics, there is a concern to link the problems of empire abroad with

and internationalism in the age of distancing

problem of racial discrimination at home. So Willkie has a sense for this growing up as he's from a family that is anti-imperial, that has questioned Americans and imperial projects abroad since the 1890s, when he was a boy. But he begins to question some of the kinds of sureties and white supremacy that's at the heart of Wilson's ideas about internationalism, and which had hamstrung the League of Nations in its ability to actually represent the many anti-colonial folks around the world who took seriously Wilson's ideas making the world safe for democracy

*EC: I'm also really drawn to studying politics that aren't clearly left or right, and that are sort of mushy—moderate or third-way, or indescribable in some way. And so I'm wondering, were you drawn to Willkie out of affinity or out of the fact that his politics are harder to parse?*

SZ: The latter. My sense of Willkie has kind of developed and modified over the years that I worked on this book. I was first drawn to this simply because I thought it was an interesting and not predictable story about the middle of the twentieth century that we didn't have the full contours of. I in no way chose to write about this because I was in some way an advocate for Willkie—although I broadly admire the kind of idealism at the heart of these non-conventional foreign policy ideas. But I probably have as much skepticism about the workability of his “one world” idea as anybody else.

On the other hand, I think it's a necessary and important perspective. We absolutely need this to be a part of the political and cultural discussion today because without it we're consigned to repeat the conventional wisdom of the Cold War and post-Cold War War on Terror era over and over again. And this idea of one world, of an interconnected world—which we take as a kind of cliché now, but we need to take more seriously as a real lived fact for millions upon millions of people—needs to get into our political discussion because we're seeing what happens when it doesn't: death. And that's where we're heading towards right. Climate change, this pandemic brings this home for so many people. That said, because Willkie's a sort of odd middle of the road figure—although moving to the left over the course of his life—he's sort of been ignored, I think, particularly in American history and American studies because he's been seen as kind of just another middle of the road, conventional liberal. I think that's a misunderstanding of the actual messiness of culture and politics during World War Two in which a lot of things were up for grabs. Willkie died early in 1944. And he may have resolved as just another conventional Cold War liberal great in some ways but but the ideas that he set out in the in the middle of the '40s were ones that were a particular brand of a certain current of left-liberal thought that was trying to pull the center and liberalism to the

to the left. Basically, I wrote the book because he was a fascinating figure who scrambled these pieties, right, in American politics. And I think that's what good cultural history should try to do, is to take a look at the competing tendencies in a period weigh them and suggest how the changing common sense of a period takes shape due to the political pressures and the forces of play in the making of sort of common sense hegemony over what how people think about the world. And that's what this attempts to do rather than take up a position for against yay or nay yeah critique for against Wilkie as a person.

*EC: So, if I'm remembering correctly, the book came out the day that we all evacuated, right?*

SZ: It's been unfortunate in some ways but fortunate in others. [Coronavirus] has given me new ways to think about [Willkie]. It's given me new perspectives to try to understand what this book is about. I always thought of it as a history of globalization. That was a little bit less clear to me and a little bit more obscure before March. Now, it's very clear to me why this is a book about the dilemmas of interconnection and interdependence on a global scale—why that's a necessary conversation for the world to have, and why it's hard for the United States, why it's a pitched battle for the United States as a country that has a particular form of exceptionalism and nationalism running through its its political culture and values a certain form of individualism that mitigates against any understanding of mutual support and interdependency. And some of those things were important to Willkie as well. He's an interesting mixed figure because he's ambivalent. He is at once a kind of internationalist and a kind of cheerleader for the United States. So some of his more radical ideas end up collapsing back to a certain kind of reliance on tropes of American nationalism too, and that ambivalence is fascinating and continues to bedevil politics, and I think always will. What this book helps I think, to do, is illuminate the longer history of this problem and to show Americans that we've had this conversation with us for a long time, and it actually has one of its starting places in a moment that we don't often think of in these terms, which is World War II. We think of World War II as a story about destroying fascism, and creating a world for freedom for liberal democracy. But another way to look at this is that the United States was at that moment inheriting the global empire that had been established by the British Empire and was having to figure out what to do about that. Willkie's intervention into this to try to shift that stewardship of a new global Empire into a more democratic form and in more democratic shape continues to be a useful lesson for us today.

# STAYING HOME FOR THE HOMELESS

Sophomore Peder Shaefer, who works with HOPE and Street Sights, advocates for temporary housing for the homeless during the pandemic.



Illustration by Eliza Macneal.

The front-page headline of the *Providence Journal* on April 4 proclaimed, in bold type: Raimondo: Stay home, or ‘more people will die.’

Governments across the world are ordering citizens to stay at home and practice social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus and save lives. But what happens to people for whom staying home isn’t an option?

Rhode Island is one of many state governments across the country asking the impossible of people experiencing homelessness, one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the United States. With many Rhode Islanders living in parks, tents, and densely-packed emergency shelters, there exists a perfect storm for coronavirus to spread quickly among homeless people, many of whom already have chronic health conditions. Over 75 percent of homeless people are smokers, for example, and the homeless population skews older than the general population, increasing the risk of fatally contracting COVID-19.

Decades of failed or non-existent housing policies at the state and federal levels have created a system where many Rhode Islanders can’t afford a home. Rhode Island only invested 5 dollars per capita in housing in 2017, compared to 100 dollars in Massachusetts. While Rhode Island’s housing crisis has become a disaster because of years of systemic failure, there is action that the state can take tomorrow to ensure more people have access to a safe, clean, and secure place to stay in the midst of a pandemic.

Dave “Bumblez” Caplan, 38, is staying at Harrington Hall, a men’s emergency shelter in Warwick that can house over 100 people in densely packed bunk beds. On April 5th, a staff member there tested positive for the coronavirus, leading to quarantine measures for staff who had direct contact with the person and raising concerns about the health of more than 90 men who were staying at the shelter. The staff member who tested positive is now in the hospital.

Bumblez has been homeless for a while, but he’s never seen a situation like this. “It’s rather scary,” he told me in an interview, speaking by phone from the shelter. “I feel like we’re on the brink of a total collapse. When this is over, we’re going to be feeling this for a while.”

Bumblez said that for the past week members of the National Guard have been building a large tent next to Harrington Hall. The heated tent, which has 40 cots inside, is meant to decrease the density within the shelter, reducing the possibility of the virus spreading, according to a press release from Crossroads RI, the largest homeless service provider in the state and the organization that runs Harrington Hall. Another 24-person tent is being

built next to the main Crossroads complex at 160 Broad Street in Providence.

Even with the extra space, conditions aren’t optimal at Harrington. Last week, for example, people staying at the shelter received an orange, a granola bar, and a bag of cereal without milk. Harrington doesn’t usually offer food to clients, but has done so since the coronavirus crisis began in order to keep people from going out to soup kitchens and meal sites.

“I’ve seen some people at the Hall right now who are really starving and hostile,” said Bumblez. “They’ve never promised us breakfast when we’ve stayed in before, but what are you supposed to do with people now? You gotta give people something to eat....They’re feeding us bread and water like prisoners.”

And those who choose not to stay in a shelter for fear of contracting the virus in a dense setting don’t have many other options. Many homeless people spend the day in places like the Providence Place Mall or Kennedy Plaza, but with many businesses closed, homeless people don’t have safe, dry places to stay. “I’m at risk either way, whether I’m at the hall or out,” Bumblez said.

But according to homeless advocates like Eric Hirsch, a professor of sociology at Providence College, there is a clear solution to this dangerous problem.

Using executive power, Governor Gina Raimondo can demand that Rhode Island’s hotels and colleges open up empty rooms to people experiencing homelessness, providing them a private, clean, and dry place to stay during a global health emergency. Because most college students have been sent home and people have stopped traveling for work and leisure, many of these spaces lie empty. The state has worked with some hotels, such as the Wyndham Providence Airport Hotel in Warwick, to provide places for housing-insecure people to self-quarantine if they show COVID-19 symptoms or test positive. This is a good first step, but if the state temporarily houses all who are now living in shelters, it can contain any spread of the virus before it spirals out of control.

“This is taking longer than it should,” said Hirsch, a 30-year advocate for the homeless community in Rhode Island. “This is the most vulnerable population in the state, certainly in terms of where they’re sleeping and underlying health conditions.”

According to Hirsch, Connecticut has taken action to protect their homeless communities by housing people in hotel rooms. Working with government leaders, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness moved just under 1,000 people into 800 empty hotel rooms across the

state. California, which has the largest homeless population in the country, took similar action last week, and now has 7,000 hotel rooms available for people living outside over the age of 55 or with chronic conditions. California hopes to increase that number to 15,000 available rooms in the coming weeks.

In order to reduce overcrowding in emergency shelters and to provide real meaning to Raimondo’s ‘stay at home’ orders, Hirsch argues that Connecticut’s rapid response is the kind of action we need in Rhode Island. Over 4,000 people experience homelessness over the course of a year in Rhode Island, and currently around 350 people are staying in shelters. By making 300 hotel rooms available, Hirsh said, the state could drastically decrease shelter density.

Another option is for colleges to open their dorms to people experiencing homelessness. Over 750 people have signed a petition at Harvard University that calls on administrators to open dormitory space for people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge, according to the *Harvard Crimson*. Currently, there is no known effort to open dorms to people experiencing homelessness at local colleges, like Brown, RISD, Johnson and Wales, and Providence College.

Rhode Island is moving quickly to provide resources to snuff out COVID-19 infections in nursing homes, which have been epicenters of coronavirus cases nationwide. But, Hirsch queried, what makes a nursing home so different from an emergency shelter? Both places are full of at-risk, older people in dense sittings, a perfect environment for the virus to spread. Hirsch advises to treat the risk of coronavirus spreading in our emergency homeless shelters as seriously as the risk it poses spreading in our nursing homes. To do otherwise would be a double standard, claiming certain lives are more important than others. By opening up safer, cleaner shelters for those experiencing homelessness, we can make sure that double standard doesn’t continue.

The possibility of widespread infection and death in homeless communities nationwide will soon become reality unless we take action now. With more public spaces like the Providence Place Mall closed, there are fewer ways for many people experiencing homelessness to find a bathroom or a place to get out of the cold or rain. Fewer service providers are open, making it difficult to get a warm meal or medical care. Remaining providers, like Amos House and McCauley House, are continuing to give out food in bags, but those locations might shut down operations soon because of the virus.

“We’re still in this weird, waiting for the other shoe to drop phase,” said Megan Smith, a direct outreach worker and case manager at House of Hope Community Development Corporation. “Things are going to get terrible once the infection rate spikes...the health side is going to come down any second, and it’s going to hit everyone all at once, because folks are so close, either in the shelters or outside.”

Smith’s warning shows that time is of the essence. Hundreds of Rhode Islanders are in the same situation as Bumblez, living in densely packed shelters without a safer option. Hirsch’s simple solution—use empty hotel or dorm space to house people experiencing homelessness—is the way to ensure justice for all Rhode Islanders in the midst of a crisis. Governor Raimondo needs to act now, before the virus starts spreading in homeless communities, to provide people experiencing homelessness the shelter they need. Even then, she might be too late. With a COVID-19 case confirmed at Harrington Hall, the virus may already be spreading in the homeless community.

*If you want to advocate on this issue, we encourage you to email Governor Raimondo at [governor@governor.ri.gov](mailto:governor@governor.ri.gov) and ask her to use her executive powers to commandeer empty hotel and dorm rooms for at-risk homeless populations.*