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Awards

An
Impact
Bigger than
Herself

Through her work at SELF Inc., CEO Dr. Shirlana Dash championed a program to address youth homelessness. Across Philadelphia, her work has made a difference for people of all ages.

FOR DR. SHIRLANA DASH, placing unhoused people in shelters isn't her end goal—it's just her starting place. By equipping unhoused people with the resources to build healthy, sustainable, self-sufficient futures, her ultimate goal is to empty those shelters. And as the CEO of the Philadelphia nonprofit agency SELF Inc. since October 2024, Dr. Dash is positioned to make it happen.

"I didn't come to SELF as a job," she says. "I came here as an assignment, and the assignment was to help empower people and make their lives better."

SELF stands for Strengthening and

Empowering Lives and Futures—and under Dr. Dash's leadership, it's living up to its name. When the organization was founded 44 years ago by Dr. Sylvester Outley, its mission was to put substance abuse counseling resources in shelters around the city, with the intention of helping unhoused people gain stability and become self-sufficient. It's now able to do that and more. From emergency and permanent supportive housing to personalized case management, mentorship, financial education, job placement and more, SELF is a comprehensive resource system for



Heart of the Matter: Dr. Dash, who joined SELF Inc. in 2022, says change doesn't always come from the top and that participants should have a voice. She brings this ethos to the nonprofit by meeting regularly with residents to hear their perspectives and suggestions.

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vulnerable individuals and families throughout Philadelphia. With five emergency shelters, an intake center that helps individuals get placed in a shelter right for them, two outreach teams, and a vast network of permanent and transitional housing units, SELF serves over 1,000 people daily. In the last two months alone, it’s helped 348 individuals secure their own housing.

Much of that is due to Dr. Dash’s expertise in public policy and community service. She has a PHD in Public Policy and Administration, Public Management and Leadership from Walden University, an MPA from Strayer University and a B.S. in Social Work from Temple University.

Before coming to SELF, she started a nonprofit called Dr. Dash and Friends, dedicated to serving meals to senior citizens and veterans in the community. Dr. Dash not only cooks these large meals, but also offers recreation and entertainment: Her brother, a DJ, plays music at the community feedings. The effort is primarily inspired by her mother, who regularly cooked for community members and showed the importance of food security.

Along with her nonprofit experience and past involvement with SELF as COO, when she stepped into the CEO position, Dr. Dash brought with her a background in social work and over 25 years of experience in city government and child welfare. Her work with families and young people inspired her vision to build youth-specific programming at SELF—and when, within the first few weeks of her tenure, the former mayor announced that the city had received an \$8.9 million grant for youth homelessness, Dr. Dash set out to bring that vision to life. But like all of SELF’s projects, that development required intention in order to be meaningful.

“We brought the people in our shelters to a round table and asked them: What do you think you would have needed to have in place at age 18?” explains Dr.

Dash. “We can receive the funding, but if we don’t know how to intentionally create programs that impact change, then we are wasting those dollars.”

Opening this new youth-specific shelter—which is named “Miss Barbara’s House” after her mother—is just one of Dr. Dash’s change-making accomplishments at SELF. What’s consistent across every achievement is that they’re approached with intention and compassion, and guided by the insight of the people she serves. Through a participant council, made up of the people in SELF’s shelters and programs, Dr. Dash and her staff meet regularly with participants to hear about what services are most appreciated and what areas might need additional resources. Then, they make change accordingly.

“I don’t think that changes should always come from the people at the top. I need the participants to have a voice,” she says. “The goal is to empty the shelters, but how can you do that unless you sit down and talk to people, and evaluate the quality of what you’re bringing to the table?”

Those conversations not only influence initiatives, but also enable participants to connect with Dr. Dash and her team to forge long-term relationships, which carry on even after they move on from SELF’s services. One story that Dr. Dash shares is of a participant who’s been involved with the organization for over 10 years. He came into a shelter off the street, received the support he needed, found a job and housing, and now works as a supervisor at one of the emergency shelters. His presence is a beacon of what’s possible.

“He’s a living example,” Dr. Dash says. “Every day, he empowers our participants to walk in dignity.”

Looking ahead, Dr. Dash is leading SELF towards new heights, expanding its reach geographically and forming new partnerships. But her investment in community engagement goes even deeper. In addition to a rich educational background, she’s traveled to 67 countries and researched the ways other nations address housing insecurity, and the ways that different community structures can give people a sense of value and purpose. That global insight, combined with her extensive experience working locally in and around Philadelphia, informs her continued dedication to human services—and propels her to continue to change lives.



Driving Change

By transporting excess food from businesses to food banks, Victoria Wilson’s team is feeding individuals and families across Philadelphia.

AFTER GRADUATING FROM DREXEL with a degree in entertainment and arts management, Victoria Wilson set out for a career in New York. But when COVID hit, she was in Philadelphia and watched as her partner, Evan Ehlers, received calls from restaurants around the city looking to do something with their excess food during lockdown. At the time, Ehlers was running a small project called Sharing Excess, originally started at Drexel to help students donate extra meal swipes. Seeing so many restaurants reach out to Ehlers, Wilson quickly switched paths to help out—and with her passion, the project had the potential to skyrocket.

“We spent the next 72 hours rescuing food from every restaurant we could and bringing it back to food banks,” Wilson remembers. “We were young, scrappy and completely convinced that what we were doing could change the world.”

Wilson’s conviction was right. Now COO of Sharing Excess, she has helped change the shape of food rescue around the city and country. Since she and Ehlers set out to rescue excess food in 2020, the organization’s impact has nearly doubled every year. In 2025 alone, they’re projected to move 100 million pounds of food into food banks and donation centers that can then give it to those in need. Before Sharing Excess, the middleman between businesses and food banks was largely untapped territory—and now, the nonprofit’s efforts have both reduced waste and helped offer consistent meals to those with food insecurity.

“Our end goal is to make donating food the easiest possible thing for food businesses, so that the alternative option—a landfill—is not even considered,” she says.

At just 28 years old, Wilson moves the needle on that goal daily, with 800 food business partners, including two of the largest produce markets in the country. Sharing Excess is evolving, too, thinking of ways to transport inedible excess products to compost partners, continuing to fuel a cycle of sustainability. Plus, through social media partnerships, Wilson shares their message and inspires larger change nationally. Using her degree, she’s made two viral videos that have become some of the most viewed ever about food rescue.

Her fast footwork and ability to wear so many different hats fuel her successful leadership, but, to her, the work is more than a job. In pursuing fulfilling, meaningful projects, she’s inspired by her team, primarily made up of women who are dedicated to making a difference even in the face of challenges. “We’re in a male-dominated environment, and we were told up and down we’d never survive,” she says. “I’ve learned so much from the women I work with: How to break those perceived gender barriers, and how to effectively lead with passion and also with your heart.”

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