

# Ending Homelessness

An Interview with Myung J. Lee, President and Chief Executive Officer, Volunteers of America - Greater New York, Inc.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Myung Lee is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Volunteers of America-Greater New York, Inc. (VOA-GNY). She joined VOA-GNY from Cities of Service, a global nonprofit organization founded in 2009 by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, where she served as its inaugural Executive Director. Before joining Cities of Service, Lee served as a Deputy Commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's Services where she was responsible for the \$1 billion Division of Early Care and Education. She was also the Tri-State Region Executive Director at Jumpstart for Young Children, Vice President of Marketing and Development at Safe Horizon, Program Director at the Partnership for the Homeless, and helped launch AmeriCorps at The Corporation for National and Community Service. She has held senior positions in the private sector at Major League Baseball Advanced Media, LRN the Legal Knowledge Company, Modis legal staffing, and the Wallace Law Registry. Lee is a New Yorker who graduated from the Bronx High School of Science. She holds a BA in political science from the State University of New York at Binghamton and a JD from Georgetown University Law School.



Myung J. Lee

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Volunteers of America-Greater New York ([voa-gny.org](http://voa-gny.org)) is the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. and is one of the largest providers of human services in the metropolitan New York area. Founded in New York City in 1896 as a charity staffed by volunteers tending to the city's poor, today VOA-Greater New York has 1,300 paid staff that provide life-changing, often life-saving services through 80 programs in New York City, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey.

**What excited you about the opportunity to lead Volunteers of America – Greater New York and made you feel it was the right fit?**

VOA-GNY allows me to pursue the causes I feel most strongly about in the city I call home. I arrived in New York City from Seoul in 1976 with my parents, and I am grateful for the opportunities this country has afforded

me. I want everyone to have access to those same opportunities that I have enjoyed and am fortunate to be passing on to the next generation in my household. That's why I've spent most of my professional life supporting people who are impacted by poverty – whether trying to end homelessness or ensure quality early childhood education for children in low-income communities or advocate for those communities having a voice in the democratic

process. And that's why our mission at VOA-GNY, an anti-poverty organization looking to end homelessness by the year 2050, is also to help our clients access housing, health and wealth-building opportunities. Achieving our goal requires advancing programming with those key ends in mind while also addressing systemic barriers to our clients' success, such as racism.

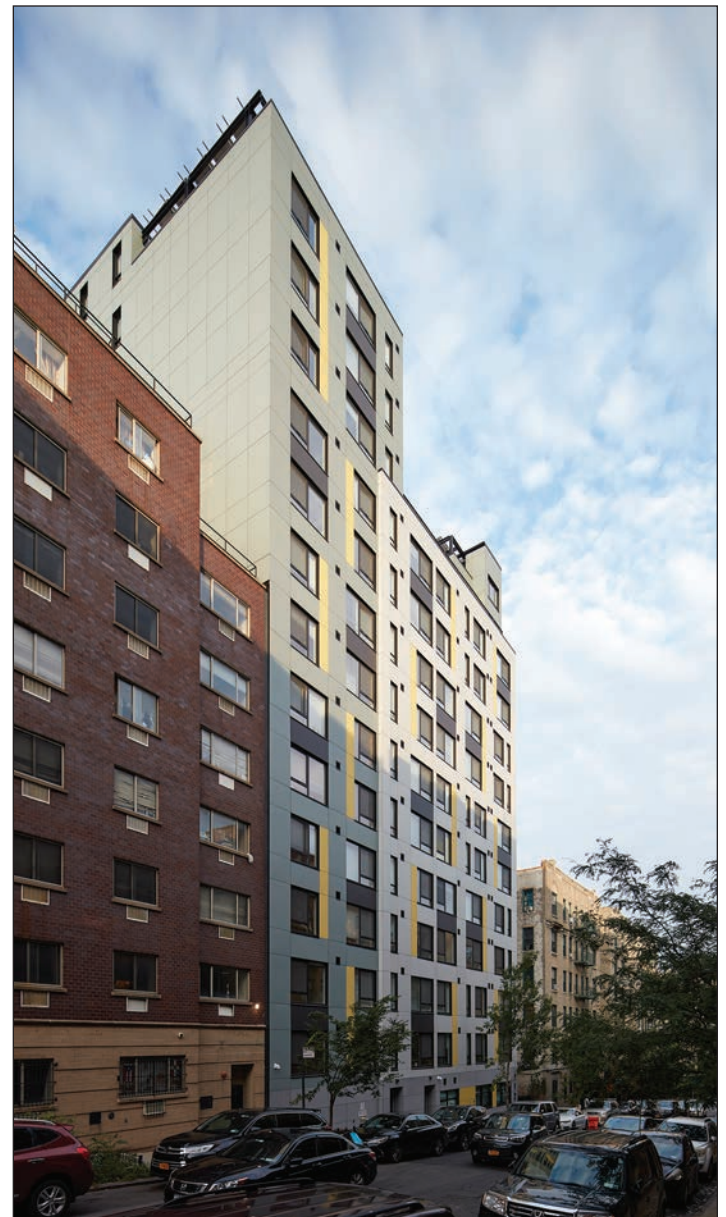
I was also drawn to VOA-GNY as an established organization, founded in 1896, with a seasoned Board. We share a mutual interest in securing what we have while planning for the next phase of our work as an organization – in continually improving to meet the challenges of our time. So VOA-GNY provides a stable foundation for leaping off into entrepreneurial ventures – my favorite combo.

**How has the work of VOA-GNY evolved and will you provide an overview of its initiatives?**

When an organization that began in 1896 chooses, as its next leader, a cisgender female lawyer raised in New York City but born in South Korea, that's a pretty powerful statement about evolution right there. What has also evolved is our focus on the work – we will continue to provide shelter and support, but will do so with a focus to end homelessness. In short, we

understand that genuinely ending the cycle of homelessness means developing more affordable housing while also helping people get off the hamster wheel of being housed, then losing their housing, then entering the system again.

That key next step means we must help our clients address core issues like domestic violence, or mental and behavioral health problems, and substance abuse issues while also developing pathways to build generational



East Clarke Place Senior Residence



*A community room at East Clarke Place Senior Residence*

wealth, whether through home ownership or a career that allows our clients to earn meaningful wages – or even build their own business. On that note, we’re very excited about our latest proactive response to the dual homelessness and aging crises: East Clarke Place Senior Residence, our recently opened, \$68 million, 14-story, 122-unit housing facility for low-income and chronically homeless seniors. It’s the result of a partnership between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors created to meet the growing demand for affordable housing for older adults.

East Clarke Place is also proof positive of our belief that breaking the cycle of homelessness requires not only affordable housing, but also the kinds of resident services that keep people housed. So we have support staff, including a Wellness Coordinator and social workers, helping our residents who have been chronically homeless learn how to pay rent and utilities, shop and cook, and maintain their health and sense of community. What does a movement class that strengthens a senior citizen’s hip muscles while also getting her out of her apartment and connecting her to her neighbors have to do with ending homelessness? Everything!

*The Bronx Times* says that East Clarke Place “could be a blueprint for addressing NYC homelessness” – and a blueprint is precisely what this moment calls for as millions more Boomers become seniors amidst skyrocketing housing costs.

**How did VOA-GNY adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the resilience of your team during this unprecedented time?**

First of all, our staff are incredible. They didn’t get the type of attention and adulation that the healthcare workers, very deservedly,

received, but my staff are absolutely and every bit #Essential #Heroes. They showed up to work every single day, putting their own lives and their families’ lives at risk, so that they could care for the people who depend on us.

I’m proud of VOA-GNY’s quick response time, too. Even before the government went into action, we moved quickly to keep clients and staff healthy and safe by putting emergency protocols in place around cleaning, PPEs, social distancing, etc. We also advocated for our clients with kids in shelters so that they could get the equipment they needed to keep going to school virtually. That included raising funds to set up learning pods at shelters so that kids who wouldn’t have had Wi-Fi access otherwise could get it.

The logistics around COVID health and safety measures were especially tricky when it came to the many program staff who provide 24/7 services. Accounting for staff safety as well as the safety of our clients, and the fact that our staffs’ lives and the lives of their families were also being upended, meant that we needed to be flexible about scheduling at each of our program sites. Another way we needed to adapt was by reimbursing staff for taking car services to work instead of public transportation. Staff helped out by doing everything possible to fill in for one another: maintenance workers did front desk duty, if necessary, and office staff did maintenance work.

We are proud of how effective our safety measures were. But when a few of our clients did contract COVID, our staff went the extra mile to keep them and the people around them safe – making sure they were socially distanced, getting their food and medicine, and in one case even going to the local store to get a client’s favorite chicken soup. Amazing. I simply can’t say enough good things about our staff.

**What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?**

Driven, imaginative, curious, entrepreneurial. I think that one of my greatest strengths is having enough self-awareness to surround myself with people who have strengths that are different from mine. I aim to be transparent and approachable and I try to allow for mistakes – mine and other people’s. We’re all human, and that’s how we learn.

**Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?**

Yes. When I was a young child, I used to tell my parents that I wanted to run an orphanage like my maternal grandfather did during the Korean War in Pusan, South Korea. I spent some of my professional life in the private sector and while I succeeded, I never felt complete. It was only when I started working in the nonprofit and public sectors that I felt I had found my calling. I love being in the people business.

**How do you measure success of VOA-GNY’s work and how important is it for the organization to take moments to celebrate the wins?**

We measure our outputs and outcomes like any other business, though our ultimate outcomes take much longer to achieve. After all, we’re dealing with the arc of people’s lives as well as poverty, racism, and other issues that impact progress along the way. We set achievable KPIs to mark our progress and celebrate our victories. We want to end homelessness – for today’s client to receive the kinds of services and programmatic support so that they will never have to return to us.

It takes time for a client to be on their own, in their own home and doing well for themselves and their family and receiving the kind of follow-up care that will help keep them there. On the way to that goal, there’s a step-by-step process with clear procedures and milestones. We need to start with the more immediate win of placing our clients in a safe setting to help them get stabilized. From there, we might need to seek help for some of their health issues. That’s another win. Once those healthcare needs are dealt with, we can help clients stabilize their financial situation – often by connecting them with benefits while also helping them find well-paying work, or the kind of training that can help build a career.

It’s vital to celebrate the successes along the way. Otherwise, it’s going to feel like a long, impossible slog – remember the last time you tried to stop drinking coffee or vowed to start every morning with meditation or a three-mile run?

It’s akin to what I tell people who move to my home city, New York City, for the first time. Don’t try to get to know the Big Apple all at once. Start with your neighborhood, then move out from there. In just a few years, you’ll feel like a native New Yorker, and you’ll know what you need to know. ●