



Ending homelessness, strengthening communities

Stephanie Kasprzak of the Monroe County Opportunity Program knows the difference that township officials can make in ending homelessness in their communities.

Monroe Charter Township (Monroe Co.) Supervisor **Alan Barron** takes part in his community's annual Walk for Warmth and serves on his county's homeless advisory committee. As a middle school teacher, he has taught children who live in cars or who are changing homes weekly. Barron also gets his class involved in homeless awareness activities.

Frenchtown Charter Township (Monroe Co.) Supervisor **Jim McDevitt** has been a vital partner in advancing a Habitat for Humanity project that is turning vacant lots in a foreclosed subdivision into new, affordable homes.

Kasprzak has a simple description of this pair from her community: *Heroes for the Homeless*. There are heroes like this all around our great state, and ample opportunity for more.

"Monroe County has several truly engaged supervisors," said Kasprzak, a leader in her county's 10-year Campaign to End Homelessness. "They have gone the extra mile and are helping us serve some of their struggling friends and neighbors—and strengthening the community as a result."

Homelessness is more than an urban phenomenon. It is suburban, it is rural, and, surprisingly, in some ways it is more challenging outside of core cities, where people and services are clustered.

Michigan's Campaign to End Homelessness has a 10-year plan, which covers every square inch of the state. And now, a new partnership between this campaign and the Michigan Townships Association is being forged to broaden awareness of the problem in townships, as well as to help local officials know where to turn when a constituent comes to them for help.

"Homelessness is almost invisible in some rural communities, but people are living under bridges, they are doubled up, and churches are providing them with shelter," said Sally Harrison, who leads the Campaign to End Homelessness as director of rental services and homeless solutions for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA). "The challenge is not just identifying that [the homeless] are there, but knowing how to help because there are often limited resources."

Township officials can—and do—play an important role in supporting the campaign, whether it's by expanding awareness, supporting affordable housing projects, or knowing where to direct someone who is facing a housing crisis.

A STATEWIDE PROBLEM

In 2011, about 94,000 Michiganders were homeless at one time or another. The state can quantify the homeless population through information gathered by service providers and entered into the Michigan Statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Administered by the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness, this database generates information that is analyzed and organized for sharing at the local level as well as to the general public.

Contrary to the myth, most people who are homeless are not addicted males. Last year, for example:

- More than half were adults and children in families.
- Two-thirds of homeless families were headed by women.
- Thousands were children. The typical child without a home is seven years old.
- While people with a good education are more likely to have housing stability, about one in four homeless adults had some college or technical education.
- Some 28 percent were the working poor.

The collapse of the auto industry, the state's Great Recession and the unprecedented foreclosure crisis created a perfect storm that tossed thousands of Michigan residents out of their homes over the past decade. Yet, the economy is just part of the story.

"People become homeless for all sorts of reasons, whether it's a lost job, an accident or serious illness or domestic violence," said Eric Hufnagel, executive director of the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness. "Too often, they don't know how to get help."

But there is good news as well. Last year alone, the campaign ended homelessness for more than 38,000 people, and the number of people who were homeless in 2011 was about 6,000 fewer than during the previous year.

MORE THAN AN URBAN ISSUE

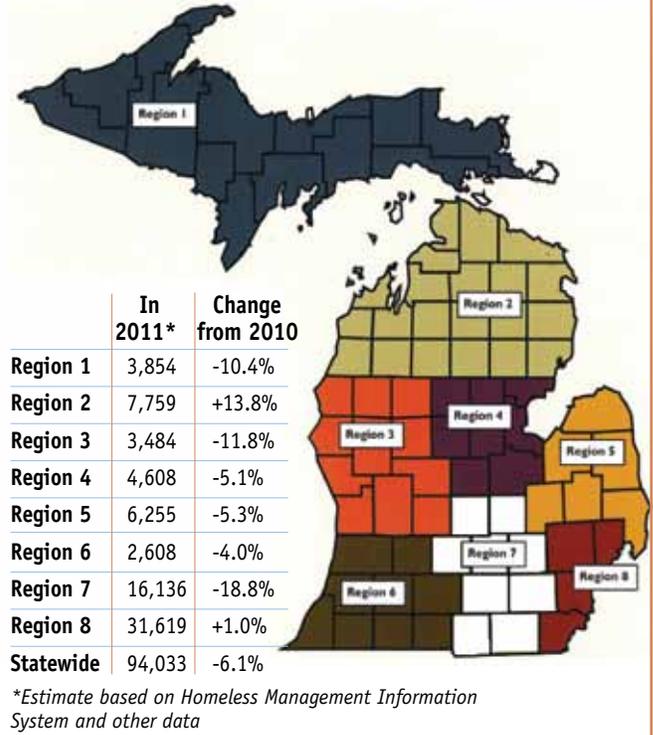
While most homelessness occurs in cities, it tugs at every thread of the Michigan mitten. In 2011, nearly 6,000 people were homeless in west central Michigan, and about 1,400 were homeless in the Upper Peninsula.

The face of rural homelessness is different than that in the cities:

- Homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be part of a family.
- Rural homeless families more often have two adults.
- Homeless adults in rural areas are more likely to have jobs.
- They are more likely to be homeless for the first time.
- They are less likely to have a disability.

Debra Schafer is assistant director of the Mid-Michigan Community Action Agency (MMCAA), which serves people who are homeless in Bay, Clare, Gladwin, Mecosta and Osceola Counties. She provided this picture of rural homelessness:

How many people are homeless in your region?



"You could be staying in your car, in a tent or camper, or in a deer blind. You may or may not have access to a phone or public transportation. You may or may not have access to meal sites that are scattered all over the county and only have meals on a few nights of the week. Imagine doing your laundry in a large pot you have boiled water in over your campfire. This may be the same pot you heat up water to take a 'bath.' Imagine having your kids sleep in the car, as it is the more comfortable spot, while you take the tent or the deer blind."

Now imagine, too, the staff and volunteers for a multitude of organizations collaborating as never before to provide effective solutions. "The agencies are realizing that we all have to work very quickly and very closely together to make it work," Schafer said. "We are working very, very hard to make sure someone isn't falling through the cracks."

THE COST OF HOMELESSNESS

The human cost of nearly 100,000 Michigan residents without a place to live is staggering in itself. The dollars-and-cents costs are also of concern to taxpayers as well as to the officials they elect to serve the communities and manage limited resources. This is especially true in townships, which do not have the human services agencies to help. The costs can be more than immediately meets the eye:

- Homeless people are far more likely to end up in emergency rooms, which is the most expensive health care alternative. According to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, homeless people spend about four days longer per hospital visit than non-homeless people, or about \$2,400 per visit. ▶

About the campaign

Michigan's Campaign to End Homelessness is a public-private partnership of more than 600 partner organizations that are working collaboratively to help individuals and families with perilous housing circumstances have a roof over their head and a path to self-sufficiency. Each member of the campaign is committed to the goal of ensuring that all Michigan residents have a safe, stable and affordable place to live.



The campaign focuses on prevention and what it calls “rapid re-housing.” Sometimes, an intervention with a landlord can end a housing crisis without an eviction, or a property tax waiver can prevent a foreclosure. Yet, when prevention isn’t possible, the partners in the campaign work to find stable housing as soon as possible.

The thing to remember is that housing is never the only problem. Research shows that people are more successful in addressing underlying issues—whether it’s unemployment, addiction or domestic violence—when they have a decent place to live today, and know that they will have a decent place tomorrow.

The campaign, launched in 2006, is built around a statewide strategy for ending homelessness. The state is divided into 63 Continuums of Care (CoCs); most are single counties, but some rural areas combine two or more counties. The CoCs have each developed their own 10-year plans.

“Each area has its unique circumstances, both in terms of needs and resources,” said Eric Hufnagel, executive director of the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness. “The CoC partners have put a lot of thought and energy into developing strategies that make the most sense in their own communities.”

- Homeless people are more likely to end up in trouble with the law, taking up law enforcement resources and filling county jail cells.
- The image of homeless people wandering commercial areas or sleeping under bridges works against local officials’ efforts to build and market vibrant communities where people want to work and live. It diminishes property values as well.

West Michigan Therapy in Muskegon undertook a financial analysis of the impact of homelessness programs in the Muskegon Continuum of Care (*see sidebar at left for more on Continuums of Care*). The financial benefit from less hospitalization, less incarceration, fewer days in shelters and increased income was \$1 million.

HOMELESS STUDENTS

It is not surprising that homeless children have the odds stacked against them. They are more likely to have poor nutrition, physical conditions such as asthma or lead poisoning, emotional trauma, behavioral problems and academic delay.

There were more than 31,000 homeless students in 2010-11, according to the Michigan Department of Education. This counts not only young people living in places like shelters and cars, but also children in families that have moved in with relatives, who are “couch surfing” with friends or other families, or who are foster children recently placed in new homes.

“The problem is everywhere. Small and large, rural and urban, everything in between,” said Pamela Kies-Lowe, homeless education consultant/state coordinator for the Michigan Department of Education. “These children deserve a chance to succeed, and we want to make sure they have what they need to participate and succeed.”

Help is available for these struggling children. The first challenge is finding them.

Every school district has a homeless educational liaison responsible for identifying these students and helping them get the services they need. The liaisons work with school administrators to keep students in the same school or school district even if they are temporarily living outside the boundaries. They make sure the children have the basics, whether it’s suitable clothes, a backpack, or a way to get to school.

Communities across Michigan are also finding—and sharing—creative solutions. In Northern Michigan, school and social service agencies work together to create Host Homes for Homeless Youth, where about 150 students in a five-county area have moved in with other families for a school year, when they otherwise were ready to drop out and leave home. The host families get a modest \$10 a day for food costs. “From 2007 to 2011, we graduated 100 percent of our seniors,” said Mary Beth Novak, coordinator of the program.

Other parts of the state have created similar programs. “One of the phone calls I got was from a gentleman in Wasilla, Alaska,” Novak said. “They wanted to model a plan after ours.”

HELP FOR VETERANS

According to HMIS, about 4,300 veterans in Michigan are homeless at any given time, and another 2,500 are at risk. Campaign officials know the actual number is higher, since not everyone who is homeless reports his or her veteran's status.

This need for housing and services has grown in recent years as veterans have returned home from multiple tours of duty in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Campaign partners have responded across the state. Helping those who have sacrificed for their country is a high priority of the campaign, which is working with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on its five-year Campaign to Eliminate Homelessness for Veterans by 2015.

In Northern Michigan, veterans from 29 counties are being welcomed to the new Patriots Place duplexes in Gaylord. In Southeast Michigan, agency leaders attended a homelessness "boot camp" put on by the VA in Texas, where they developed a one-stop center to help veterans from Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw and St. Clair counties.

RESIDENTS WANT COMMUNITIES TO HELP

Homelessness is a nonpartisan issue, and residents want it on their local leaders' agenda. Solid majorities of Republicans, Democrats and Independents recognize that most people are not homeless by choice and that their communities have an important role in helping their neighbors find stable housing.

The campaign has been gauging public attitudes toward homelessness through an annual public opinion for three years. The 2012 results show some very interesting results.

- Forty-six percent said homelessness is a serious problem in their own community, while only 29 percent disagreed. The rest were neutral, didn't know or wouldn't answer.
- About two-thirds disagree with the idea that homelessness is a lifestyle choice, while only one in nine agree.
- More than two-thirds believe that, regardless of the economy, homelessness could happen to anyone.
- Fifteen percent knew someone who was homeless in the previous six months. While that may not seem like a lot, it equates to nearly 1.5 million residents.
- Only 3 percent believe his or her community is doing too much to address homelessness. About half said their community was not doing enough, and 38 percent said their community was doing the right amount.

This poll of 600 likely voters was conducted by the Lansing-based polling firm EPIC-MRA. It had a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points.

"It's clear from these polls that most people understand that homelessness is not only a serious problem in Michigan; it is a serious problem in their own community," said Hufnagel.



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FINDING THE RIGHT LOCAL SOLUTIONS

The Campaign to End Homelessness is not about finding any solution to ending an individual's or family's homelessness; it is about finding the right solution—one that will lead to stable housing for the long term, and one that maximizes the use of limited resources.

For one family, a security deposit might be enough to avoid homelessness. Someone else might need permanent supportive housing (a place to live and ongoing assistance) in order to maintain stable housing.

The efforts to find the right solutions have been enhanced recently with the creation of one-stop referral centers called Housing Assessment and Resource Agencies (HARAs). The goal is to establish the HARAs as a central starting point that guides people in need to the services that are the most appropriate for their circumstances, rather than having them travel from agency to agency, which in rural areas can be especially problematic.

Each HARA has a housing specialist who conducts assessments, identifies needs, and develops housing plans to end or avoid homelessness. The specialists know which agencies have capacity and can steer clients to assistance in getting a housing voucher, finding a job or keeping their children in school. ▶



Getting started: Tips for townships

1. Introduce yourself to the coordinator or chairperson of your local Continuum of Care, which coordinates activities of the Campaign to End Homelessness. Learn about homelessness in your area and who the partners are. Ask how you can help.
2. Learn which agency in your community is the Housing Assessment and Resource Agency, and keep its contact information handy. It's the place to turn to when a constituent needs help.
3. Help is available for students who are homeless or bouncing from place to place. Every school district has a homeless educational liaison responsible for getting students the assistance they need.
4. Volunteer to join the local campaign's advisory committee or to serve as a liaison to your township board.
5. Help publicize events to end homelessness and take part in activities.
6. Invite someone from the campaign to make a presentation to your township board or at a meeting of your MTA county chapter.
7. Work with campaign partners in promoting affordable housing projects in your community.
8. Visit www.thecampaigntoendhomelessness.org for more information.

"Oftentimes, city or township leaders become aware of a local problem and aren't sure where to go for rental assistance, utility help, mental health services, or any number of needs that result in homelessness or take them on the brink of homelessness," said Janet Irrer, MSHDA's homeless programs manager. "The campaign was created to not only get people into housing but to provide them with the services to stay housed."

The Mid-Michigan Community Action Agency, which serves as the HARA in its region, operates an office in each county as well as a toll-free number. As MMCAA's Schafer further explained, "We do the emergency triage portion first, especially if they're sleeping out in the elements or in their car. We're going to immediately get them into a motel, and from there we're going to start working ... right at the motel because, typically, they either don't have a lot of transportation or a lot of gas."

The first priority is finding people a place to live. Fortunately, MMCAA has excellent relationships with landlords and can work with them promptly to find decent housing. Then, they begin to address underlying issues, such as unemployment or mental illness.

"We are going to refer them to these agencies, but luckily, all of them serve on our interagency service team, so I can call the person we know and say this is the person I have, this is the referral form, and stay in the loop so we know exactly what is happening," Schafer said.

Many communities also host Project Connect events, where service providers gather for a single day to help people in poverty with anything from a getting a haircut to finding jobs or housing. Township officials often help in promoting the events.

NEXT STEP FOR TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS: GETTING INVOLVED

Across the state, many township officials are already engaged in their local campaigns. Some serve on 10-year-plan advisory boards that shape and monitor strategies; some use their positions to expand local awareness of homelessness and events to help people who are homeless; and others may work with campaign partners to develop new affordable housing.

Jim McDevitt, Frenchtown Charter Township supervisor, worked with campaign partner Habitat for Humanity on a project to develop 20 lots in a foreclosed subdivision. The end product for Habitat will be in the building of 20 affordable homes for low-income residents.

McDevitt has invited campaign leaders to make presentations at the local meetings of the Monroe County MTA Chapter. He has enjoyed working with the campaign to provide assistance to residents who are struggling. "We try to find the people who are in need—I don't care if it's kids, families, mothers with kids that have no spouse—and get them in the right direction so that they're not homeless and on the streets," he said.

McDevitt was honored with the Heroes for the Homeless award by the Monroe County CoC.

MTA and the campaign are in the early stages of developing a partnership that should give township officials knowledge about how they can help when someone with a housing crisis approaches them. The partnership will help the campaign spread awareness and better understand how to tailor strategies outside of urban areas.

MSHDA's Harrison has a simple request for township officials: Learn what you have available in your community. Get to know the people who deliver it. And work together.

"It would be great if [officials] would introduce themselves to those organizations to say who they are," she said. "If they could create that linkage, then when they get the call and they know there's a family or household in trouble, they know who to refer them to and they know the person on the other end of the call. People don't need to be homeless." ■

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Visit www.hecampaigntoendhomelessness.org for additional information, or attend "The Invisible Homeless in Your Township," an educational session being held Thursday, Jan. 24 from 9 to 10:15 a.m. at the 2013 MTA Annual Educational Conference & Expo.