

HOMELESSNESS

# HELP NEEDED



Record-Eagle/Jan-Michael Stump

A person walks toward Safe Harbor emergency shelter as the 10th annual Walk for Health and Housing gathers nearby on Thursday in Traverse City. The emergency shelter served 393 people in the year ending Oct. 14, averaging 68 guests per night, and served 15,675 meals. Participants, led by Central United Methodist Church Director of Outreach and Discipleship Ryan Hannon, visited locations including Jubilee House, the Governmental Center and Safe Harbor to learn about services and volunteer opportunities to help the area's unhoused population.

## *GT County short about 30 shelter beds; third party could fill that gap*

BY MICHAEL J. BREAZEALE

Special to the Record-Eagle

**T**Raverse City — In this year's concerted community effort to end homelessness in the Grand Traverse region, a camping ban was enforced in the Pines, a homelessness task force was assembled, progress toward more permanent supportive housing was made,

and the Safe Harbor shelter is now open year-round.

But that local emergency shelter doesn't have enough beds for the upcoming winter, and new federal cuts threaten to limit funding for permanent support housing which would jeopardize the situation for some of the region's most vulnerable individuals.

As it stands, Grand Traverse County is short about 30 year-round shelter beds, according to Ashley

Halladay-Schmandt, executive director of the Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness.

With Goodwill Inn consistently at capacity and a total of 74 beds available at Safe Harbor, the shelter is turning away people on a regular basis — from 10 to 20 every night — as many as 68 individuals since mid-October, according to Hannah Wescott, Jubilee House director.

"I talk to people almost every morning who tried to get into

Safe Harbor the night before, but couldn't," said Ryan Hannon, director of outreach and discipleship at Central United Methodist Church.

While most local leaders agree that housing — not shelter — is the ultimate solution to ending homelessness, the importance of emergency shelters cannot be understated, especially when temperatures drop and the risk of hypothermia is

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highly. Code Blue, an emergency weather policy that shelters can implement during extreme winter temperatures, allows participating shelter locations to go into overflow mode, temporarily waiving maximum occupancy limits until temperatures rise.

But Goodwill Inn is the only local emergency shelter in Code Blue.

"Something different around Code Blue could be done," Halladay-Schmandt said.

"It needs to be more comprehensive than just one shelter taking that on. That would look like other community providers coming to the table to offer Code Blue space."

Hannon also said he would like to see a more comprehensive Code Blue plan for the community.

"There's going to need to be a place for people to go when it gets really cold," he said. "I'm hoping, with some community collaboration, we can figure out how to make it through this winter until future changes come."

"I know that the Goodwill Inn enacts Cold Blue, and that they started doing it at a slightly warmer temperature. It used to be 10 degrees or colder, but I believe they changed it to 15 degrees."

The solution to other shelters not participating in Code Blue is not as straightforward as it may seem, however.

"Safe Harbor is amazing and they are doing amazing work," Wescott said. "But they are not able to do more than they are doing. They are chock-full. They do not have room for more beds. They are so full that they can't participate in Code Blue. They don't even have floor space to throw a couple mats down on the floor (for people)."

"They are absolutely at capacity and asking any more from them would be unfair. We need to seek another option."

According to Hannon, the Homelessness Task Force's shelter group is starting to consider potential solutions.

"Safe Harbor feels bad that they can't accommodate everybody," he said. "And there is some talk about potential changes happening there. But we haven't formalized any new plan."

Halladay-Schmandt said there is strong alignment on this issue across participating organizations, and that any

long-term expansion has to come with sustainable funding.

"Right now, providers are evaluating what models could work for our community and what funding sources might realistically support them," she said. "This work is moving forward, but no specific solution has been finalized yet."

But with cold weather already upon the region, Wescott fears that the Housing and Homelessness Task Force's solutions will not be timely.

"Resources are at their limit, winter has barely begun, and the number of those who pass away in the cold is expected to disproportionately increase," Wescott said. "Our community needs a designated camping site and additional emergency shelter this winter."

"What is our moral duty to these marginalized citizens?"

Recently elected City Commissioner Kenneth Funk said shelter over-capacity is not something he has heard about at a commission meeting yet, but he is open to discussing potential solutions.

"On the campaign trail, we were questioned quite a bit about it," Funk said. "I don't know if anyone has the answer. I will say that we need to hear a little bit more from the homelessness advocacy community (about this). I am open to what they have to say. I'm concerned, because this is the time of year when homelessness can really be a life-or-death situation for people. We need to figure out how to address this."

In years past, some would set up tents in the Pines, said Hannon, who added that, with the camping ban being enforced now, more people must seek other shelter.

"I'm hoping that we are able to meet the needs for cold weather and, at the same time, continue our progress toward the ultimate solution, which is helping people get into places to live. We can't trade one for the other. We have to do both at the same time."

"The ultimate thing we want to avoid is the tragedy of someone freezing to death when there are spaces that can be [offered to them]."

Wescott also believes that, despite the city's best intentions, the closure of the Pines was executed prematurely and only exacerbated the hardships facing unsheltered residents.

"(The) poor living conditions of the Pines have only been transplanted, and new camping ordinances are harming our unsheltered neighbors,"

Wescott said. "Our new 'out-of-sight-out-of-mind' approach has made guests afraid to seek help, lest they reveal their campsites and be forced to move. The nearest legal camping spot is on Supply Road, a four-hour walk from essential resources. Constant displacement prevents campers from fully preparing for winter."

Wescott said that addiction and mental health struggles didn't end when the Pines closed. Rather, she said, without a designated space, those troubles only spilled into public areas and neighborhoods.

"The city absolutely had their minds in the right place," she said. "Yes, the conditions out there were unacceptable, but its closure has done nothing but harm our population of campers. It just moved the problem and poor living conditions further away from the resources they need to stay alive."

"Our unsheltered homeless are the most vulnerable in our population. It was really nice to have them in town, close to resources where they knew they could call for help if anything went wrong."

Wescott said that the location of the Pines, given its proximity to resources, also was critical for housing outreach.

"Our outreach workers knew they could start at the Pines and, more often than not, find the people they were looking for, or at least find their friends and, through them, the people they were looking for," Wescott said.

"But now the people who are spending all night outside, who don't have as easy access to food, are being pushed farther and farther out of town. They are constantly being moved along by the police."

Insulating winter campsites requires a lot of materials, Wescott noted — materials that are typically not very mobile, and make the walk from resource to resource that much more difficult for people who rely on community help for survival.

This is especially true in the wintertime when snow and ice make trekking from place to place all the more difficult; to say nothing of the increased risk of pedestrian-vehicle incidents inherent to shortened daylight hours, Wescott said.

"If you have an insulated tent with food and supplies in it, maybe a stash of firewood, and the police come to move you along, how are you going to take all of that with you?" she said. "Our folks who are living outside are not able to fortify their campsites to keep them alive."

"The closure of the Pines 'reduced the frequency with which they can come into town to access resources — if they can at all,'" Wescott added.

"That also impedes their journey toward housing. It only compounds the problem and the trauma of being homeless."

"We need these people close because we need to be able to work with them regularly."

Only weeks ago, Jubilee House had to close operations several times because of a lack of volunteers. Despite a recent influx of help, Wescott said the day shelter can only take in about 45

guests at a time.

"I am afraid that shelter, in the form that it takes now, will not be able to make up that deficit," she said. "We need a third party to step in. The Goodwill Inn and Safe Harbor cannot effectively operate another shelter."

Wescott stressed that, even if a better Code Blue system is implemented, it still only applies to certain weather conditions and people can freeze to death at temperatures much higher than 15 degrees — especially if they are wet.

Lasting housing progress takes years of work, she pointed out, and while the coalition is actively working on long-term solutions, those solutions are all systemic and will require significant infrastructure and

construction.

"But people's lives are in danger right now," she said. "Last night, tomorrow night, and tonight. People are at risk. Since housing takes so long to come into effect, if we are going to keep people from dying, we are going to have to come up with another emergency shelter option this winter."

"It can't just stop at Code Blue. At least until we are able to (achieve) the good work that the coalition is moving toward, we need to hold onto the status quo — plus."

"If the Pines and Safe Harbor are the status quo, we need to add a little bit extra while also maintaining what we have until we have a real solution in place. There has got to be a vacant

property somewhere that can be an overnight shelter that does nothing but keep people warm. There has got to be some deep pockets that would supply the funding for the personnel to keep that place safe overnight. There has got to be something."

## Additional threats

A federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rollout announced last Thursday evening aims to limit permanent housing and rapid rehousing funding to 30% of the total allocation.

"As our government continues to dismantle the social systems that we have in place, including healthcare and the Housing and Urban

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## GT County short 30 shelter beds

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Development funding, more people are going to become homeless,” Wescott said. “When HUD gets cut, vouchers that are currently keeping formerly homeless people housed will no longer be available and they will become homeless again. “We are absolutely at risk of them ending up back on the street again.”

According to Halladay-Schmandt, these cuts could put 70 currently housed people in the five-county region at risk of being sent back out on the streets – many of whom have been housed for years.

“Normally, we allocate 87% toward Permanent Housing,” Halladay-Schmandt said. “We have aligned our priorities for over a decade around Permanent Housing, because it works, and we have been demonstrating that it works. But, with this new CoC (Continuum of Care) NOFO (Notice Of Funding Opportunity), it will be cut by two-thirds.”

“The administration is saying that this is the highest funded CoC NOFO ever,” she continued. “They have increased the total amount available to CoCs, but they have capped the amount we can use for housing. The rest is up for reallocation to things like transitional housing

with service requirements. For example, that’s very limited rental assistance with support, along with up to 40 hours a week of mandated service by the participants in the program.”

Halladay-Schmandt said there is a belief with the federal administration that punitive and criminalization measures are the solution to permanently reducing homelessness.

“They believe the cause of homelessness is not a lack of affordable housing, but substance use disorder,” she said. “They think that forcing people into treatment and institutional settings is the answer.”

“There is no recognition in this NOFO that the nationwide affordable housing crisis is to blame for the increase in homelessness, even though study after study shows that. People who experience homelessness are willing to go into treatment, but when they leave those facilities and don’t have housing, it is really hard to maintain that. This already happens, and it doesn’t work.”

“People need housing to stay healthy,” Halladay-Schmandt said. “That is the foundation and the cornerstone of thriving and healthy communities. When you don’t have enough of that, we see homelessness increase, full-stop. This NOFO dismantles that. It does not take into consideration the housing crisis that we are all in in this country.”

While the future of

available permanent housing funding looks bleak, Hannon and Halladay-Schmandt said that all hope for reversing the action is not completely lost, as it is never too late for community members to raise their voices in an effort to convince Congress to reconsider.

“Congress can still stop this from going through,” Halladay-Schmandt said. “Folks can still contact Sen. Slotkin and Sen. Peters, who have both been on board with this not going through from the beginning. (Rep.) Bergman was one of 22 Republican House members that signed a letter asking to stop this, so our Michigan congressional reps are on board.”

But that was prior to Thursday’s rollout announcement.

Sakura Takano, chief executive officer of Rotary Charities of Traverse City, said she is worried about the long-term damage these HUD cuts might cause.

“If you look at all of the work that has been happening to get people housed as quickly as possible over the last five or so years, and when you think of the success we’ve had getting them housed,” Takano said, “and then getting that funding cut, you are just concentrating the damage toward folks who are already experiencing a lot of trauma and harm.”

“It’s hard to imagine that so many folks who have already been stably housed and are trying to live to their potential could suddenly have no

access to the resources that have been keeping them stable.”

Furthermore, Takano said that a lack of available supportive housing units will not only compound the problem caused by the lack of shelter beds, but will force local community members and municipal bodies to completely re-think and re-structure their advocacy efforts.

“Our initial advocacy efforts didn’t work to stop this,” Halladay-Schmandt said. “But there is still time. Our (HUD) application is due Jan. 12. They will make decisions around May, and release funding sometime after that.”

Despite all the collaborative, selfless work being done to help Grand Traverse County residents experiencing homelessness, Wescott said a lot of stigma still remains against them.

“If you were in their situation, how would you want to be treated?” Takano, Rotary Charities of Traverse City chief executive officer, asked. “When I look for glimmers of light and hope, it brings me to the number of people who have stepped up and out of their comfort zones to lend their resources and ears and hearts. I keep coming back to that, because we have tackled (a lot of) difficult issues as a

community.”

For others, that glimmer of hope may be as simple as being treated like a human being.

“Our community officer, who takes care of our corridor here, has noted a lot of calls from people (being harassed) just for existing in public spaces,” Wescott said. “As if it isn’t hard enough already to be without a home or a space to just exist.”

“So many of us in this town are fortunate enough to be able to go home and sit and relax, to not be bothered, and do whatever we please. Our folks who are unsheltered do not have that option. Just existing is not illegal.”



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