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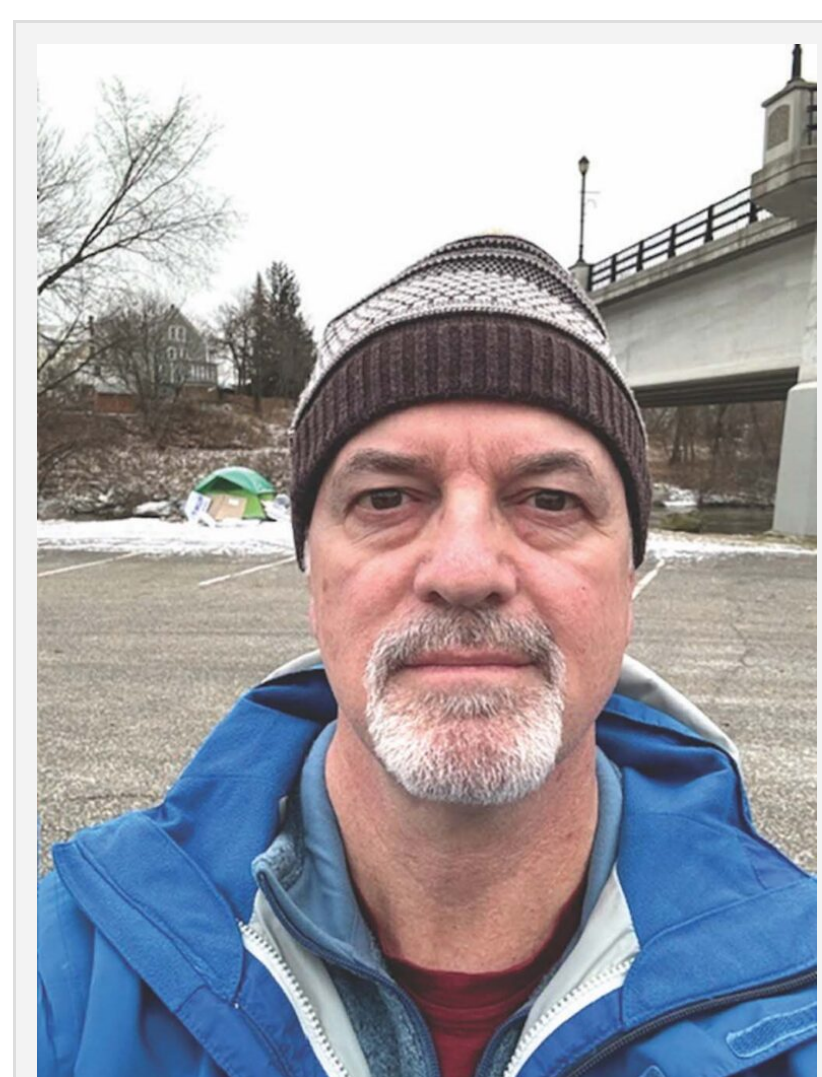
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Living Together: Solving the homelessness crisis

January 18, 2024
By Tom Morgan

Editor's note: Addison County's Homelessness Task Force consists of more than 15 participating organizations representing the fields of human services, health care, business, local and state public safety, judicial, and governmental officials, clergy and other advocates. In addition to strategic collaboration and organized "street" outreach, a task force focus is community education and awareness. This is the first in a series of pieces by the task force; the goal of these "Living Together" columns is to provide some of that awareness and perspective so that community members and decision-makers are able to have productive conversations and hopefully arrive at solutions that address the needs of all stakeholders, and especially the unhoused. Our first writer is Tom Morgan, associate director of the Charter House Coalition in Middlebury.



TOM MORGAN

Homelessness is increasingly visible in Addison County. While the comfortably housed segment of our communities might consider homelessness to be a blight on society, to the unhoused and housing insecure members of our community, homelessness is a devastating reality. Vermont communities will not successfully address the multiple challenges of, or associated with, homelessness unless we do so collaboratively, compassionately, and with common awareness of what we are facing.

We can start by considering some statistics and then look at the factors and causes of homelessness. Statistically, Vermont has the second highest rate of homelessness per capita in the country. Federal and state officials arrive at that conclusion using a method called a "point in time" (PIT) survey. A PIT captures data across geographic areas and demographic categories on one particular day, which was Jan. 25 in 2023. On that day, the PIT survey revealed that 51 out of every 10,000 Vermonters (or approximately 3,300 individuals) were literally homeless. That rate is an 18.5% increase from 2022, and more than 197% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another way to look the magnitude of housing insecurity in Vermont, is that at almost 8,000 Vermonters — including over 2,000 children — experienced some period of homelessness in 2023.

Because the state has been able shelter 96% of the unhoused members of our communities, Vermont also has the lowest rate of "unsheltered" homelessness in the country. But that success is temporary. As the Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont (HHAV) reports, 62% of Vermont's unhoused population has been sheltered in motels and hotels through so-called "transitional" programs. The remaining 34% of sheltered unhoused community members reside in "emergency" shelters like Charter House in Middlebury and John Graham in Vergennes. Most, if not all emergency shelters around the state are filled to their capacities. So when the \$400 million public funds invested in Vermont's motel/hotel programs ends as early as April, math suggests that almost 2,000 individuals and families will return to the ranks of the disenfranchised trying to survive without shelter.

Narrating Vermont's current statistics, HHAV notes some important factors that contribute to homelessness:

- Extremely low housing vacancy rates of 0.5-3% across Vermont. Some estimates are that we need 6,800 housing units immediately.
- End of emergency rental assistance programs that previously helped folks stay housed.
- Increasing evictions due to the end of the 2022 eviction moratorium.

But in a sense, these factors are symptoms of deeper root causes of housing insecurity and homelessness. Contrary to the notion that people lose their housing simply because of their own mistakes or bad luck, the conditions for homelessness in this country are set by multiple intersectional variables. Socio-economic disparity and oppression have created the ever-widening wealth gap between "haves" and "have nots." The worse elements of capitalistic forces and greed have contributed to a nation that constructs more expansive garages for privileged people's vehicles than one- and two-bedroom apartments for poor people's families. As the disenfranchised watch the privileged become richer, they continue to reach for the mythological ladders of socio-economic opportunity promised by the false narrative of "the American dream."

The function (or malfunction depending on your perspective) of our criminal justice (or injustice) system is also playing out in our community. On one hand, homelessness is an individual and collective tragedy of human suffering; homelessness is not a crime. On the other, we seem to have a justice (or injustice) system that doesn't seem able or willing to deter unhoused community members who engage in crime from re-offending and deepening individual and collective suffering. All the while, the jail-to-homelessness cycle (and the foster-care-to-jail-to-homelessness cycle) keeps spinning more people and suffering into our communities.

We witness the result of the factors, root causes and complications of homelessness in our own community. At less than 150, Addison County has a fraction of the unhoused community members that neighboring and other Vermont counties do. And while less than 10% of the unhoused are also unsheltered, the suffering is no less real for those unhoused people who do have temporary shelter, their lives no less worthy than our own, and their homelessness less intolerable by a state and people who believe everyone should have an opportunity to thrive.

Human service organizations are working diligently to shelter, stabilize and navigate homeless people into more permanent housing arrangements. This work is often hindered by staffing shortfalls, bureaucratic red tape, gaps in our physical and mental health care systems, insufficient substance-use recovery funding and residential options, and limited employment training.

Even with unified maximum effort, the systematic factors and causes of homelessness will not be changed quickly. If we are to effectively address the crisis (and yes, it is a crisis), the most effective approaches will begin with individual connections; one human engaging another in need, building one healthful relationship at a time. Meeting the unhoused and housing insecure members of our communities where they are at. Being present, affording them the dignity everyone deserves, offering them some space and support to stabilize, plan and work on meaningful goals, and progress toward achieving secure housing. Manifesting Vermont values, serving others equitably and compassionately, we can address the daunting challenges of homelessness one neighbor at a time.

Next week: A local person recovering from substance use disorder provides a recognizable face to a problem that is one part of the housing crisis.

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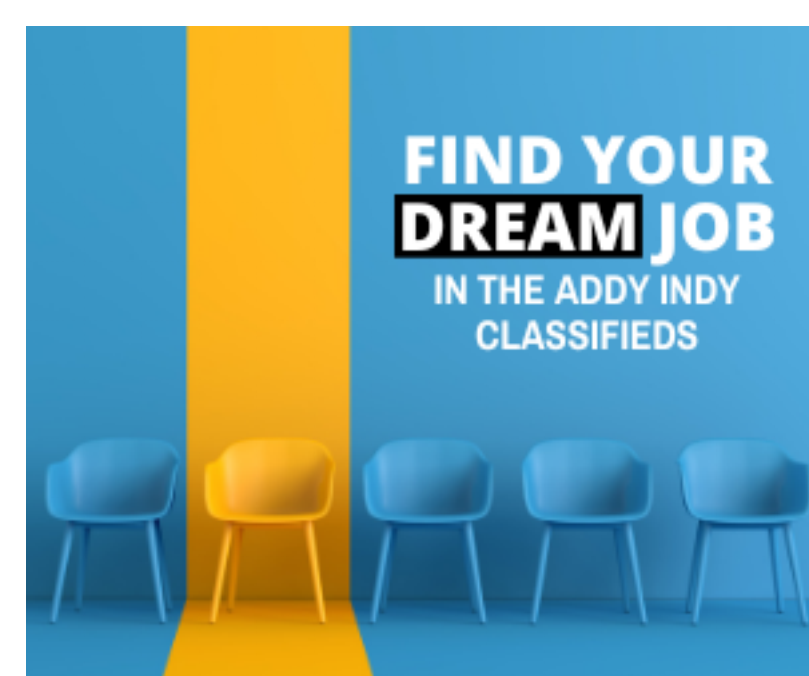
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