

Nonprofits building a case for housing

Website offers tutorial on big problem

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Local advocates for the homeless continue to battle for resources to assist one of the state’s most vulnerable populations, and they’ve developed another currency — to go along with people power and dollars — to assist in their efforts: Information.

The Addison County Housing Coalition has created a new webpage that explains, in detail, the extent of the homelessness problem in Addison County and how people can help. The webpage’s authors said they’re committed to updating the site regularly to make sure it reflects the latest stats, programs and donation options.

The aim of the site — hosted by the United Way of Addison County (UWAC) — is to draw people’s attention and turn it into action.

“We wanted (the webpage) to be the beginning of the conversation,” said Helena Van Voorst, UWAC executive director. “A lot of the time folks don’t see homelessness in Addison County, so it’s pretty easy to pretend it doesn’t happen here.”

But it does, and local facilities like Middlebury’s Charter House Emergency Shelter and John Graham Housing & Services in Vergennes are on the front lines. The Charter House, led by Heidi Lacey, continues to be full. It’s currently approved for 26 beds, with an additional three beds that can be used during an emergency.

The origin of the “Homelessness in Addison County” webpage can be traced to late last year. Lacey was among those asked to join a Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness ad hoc committee to plan Homelessness Awareness Day, which was Jan. 19. Among other things, the panel prepared events and exhibits to underscore the challenges faced by houseless persons and the nonprofits that serve them.

At the same time, the committee encouraged leaders in each Vermont county to create their own displays reminding their neighbors the extent to which homelessness exists in their midst.

“We wanted to provide a space that’s ongoing, for any interested party to see, learn and get involved (in the fight against homelessness),” Lacey said.

Addison County advocates’ strategy included the new webpage appropriately. Lacey, Van Voorst and other members of the Addison

County Housing Coalition got content for the webpage by mining many local, state and federal sources — and human services partners — to produce a remarkable archive that can be found at tinyurl.com/HomelessAC. The site features five categories of homelessness information, including statistics, housing availability, the organizations tackling the problem, real-life stories of those who are living through the challenge, and how folks can help.

Unhoused in Addison County
We have a housing crisis. Learn more about it online at: unitedwayaddisoncounty.org/homelessness-awareness-day

County has a housing crisis. Market conditions, the lack of available housing for sale and rent, and the condition of our housing stock all contribute to what has become a deeply pressing issue for our community,” reads the preamble to the Homelessness in Addison County webpage. “The lack of housing not only affects those who are here and seeking a place to live, but it also prevents the community from attracting people to live and work here. The problem is complex, but it can be solved.”

Did you know that in Addison County:

- 18 adults and four children are currently living in motels.
- 85 local households are currently waiting for housing to become available. Of these, 16 are households that include children.
- 25 people are living outside.
- There are currently 491 affordable housing units in our area, with no vacancies.
- On average, around 40 affordable apartments become available each year through the Addison County Community Trust. The Trust each year receives around 350-400 applications for housing.

“The numbers are pretty shocking,” Van Voorst said.

VERMONT IS THIRD

According to 2022 statistics provided through the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD), Vermont has one of the highest homelessness rates in the county: 43 persons per 10,000 population.

“It’s pretty sobering to see we’re third, behind places like the District of Columbia and California,” Van Voorst said.

At the same time, Vermont is one of the most successful states in sheltering its homeless population. Vermont is sheltering 98% of its residents who identify as homeless, according to HUD.

“I think that speaks to the *(See Homelessness, Page 3A)*

Homelessness

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incredible work of John Graham Housing & Services, the Charter House and others are doing to keep people sheltered,” Van Voorst said.

Lacey hopes the new webpage can also become an informational asset to faith-based and civic groups tackling housing issues. The site can provide something as simple as an email address to a state legislator, or even an idea on where affordable housing is most needed.

“We feel we’re doing a good job connecting with those who are houseless. The goal of the website, though, was to really bring our community members in,” she said. “There are a lot of conversations going on at the state level, a lot of community groups getting together to talk about affordable housing. As service providers, we’re not always able to be at every single meeting.”

One of the biproducts of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it helped human services officials get a better handle on the extent of the homeless population, Lacey said. And the feds pumped more money

into the system to care for those without homes.

“We really provided the net, in terms of motels, hotels and transitional housing,” she said. “What we’re beginning to see, as the funding (declines)... folks might be coming back. They might once again find themselves very vulnerable.”

Of particular concern to advocates was the recent decline in Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program benefits, a factor Lacey believes will result in more people becoming homeless. Another bad sign: While the Vermont Housing Authority earlier this year made 500 Section 8 rental vouchers available to qualifying citizens, 1,900 people applied. That means at least 1,400 people — about three out of four Section 8 applicants — continue to search for permanent shelter.

On the brighter side, Lacey noted the Legislature is considering an initiative to boost the state’s housing stock and more towns are revising their zoning ordinances to make it easier to develop affordable

homes. Middlebury has taken this route and will soon be evaluating a proposal to build up to 250 new units of mixed-income housing off Seminary Street Extension.

But it could be a while before legislation and zoning changes pay housing dividends, and many need shelter right now.

“There’s good change happening there,” Lacey said. “The conversations are being had about sustainability, but I think we’ll see another 12-18 months of real uncertainty.”

The new webpage is also intended to open a dialogue with landlords, according to Lacey.

“There are funds to assist them, with property improvements if they’re willing to get involved. But I think oftentimes, landlords may feel skepticism — do they rent to someone who requires affordable housing? And that’s warranted in some cases. I hope they realize that as service providers, we’re willing to walk the journey with the tenant and landlord.”

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