

A new homeless challenge ahead

End of hotel stays will cut many loose

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Under normal circumstances, Anne Heather — who is homeless — wouldn't have the wherewithal to stay even one night at the Courtyard By Marriott Hotel.

She recently marked her one-year anniversary as an accidental guest at the Middlebury hotel, courtesy of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of Vermont.

Anne Heather arrived at the Marriott on May 12, 2020. She

was among dozens of homeless individuals and families who could no longer be accommodated in conventional shelters due to the prospect of coronavirus contagion in congregate settings.

Though now lodged in a nice hotel, Anne Heather isn't living the life of a tourist.

She's in recovery (three years sober), is estranged from her family, suffers from depression, and lives — by her own admission

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Homeless

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solitary life filled with crocheting and television.

But she's already developed deep feelings about the community that has given her refuge.

"I love Middlebury," she said.

Anne Heather and around 60 other homeless hotel-motel guests in the Middlebury area will soon learn whether the town will become a more permanent home, or another temporary landing spot in a nomadic life marked by sofa surfing, shelter stays and lost apartments.

As the *Addison Independent* went to press, state officials were working on new eligibility criteria for homeless people seeking an extension — beyond the end of this month — of their pandemic-related hotel-motel subsidy. Foresta Castañeda, transitional housing coordinator with WomenSafe, said there is a possibility of extensions for domestic violence survivors

and families with children younger than 18.

But for homeless folks who won't qualify for extensions, Addison County advocates are working behind the scenes to see how the area might accommodate them.

And, even if the state money comes through, some of area hotels and motels won't continue as de facto homeless shelters because their owners want to pivot back to tourism in light of plummeting COVID-19 cases and surging vaccination rates.

TENT CITY?

Representatives of the Addison County Housing Coalition recently met with the Middlebury selectboard to brainstorm possible lodging solutions for a potential mass exodus of homeless individuals from local hotels and motels. One idea: a temporary tent city, potentially erected with the help of the Vermont National

Guard.

United Way of Addison County Executive Director Helena Von Voorst is leader of the county's Housing Coalition, which includes representatives of several local social service organizations committed to finding permanent shelter for people who need it.

"We're facing an unprecedented housing crisis and we need the town of Middlebury's help," Von Voorst told the town's selectboard members at a May 25 gathering.

She said Addison County nonprofits and volunteers have dispensed food, counseling, clothing and other services to hundreds of homeless guests lodged in our area since last March.

"While the past 14 months have been exhausting and stressful for those working to keep people housed, people experiencing homelessness in Addison County have likely never been healthier," Von Voorst said. "Many people

have been sheltered for a fairly long period of time, they've received healthy meals and regular, consistent access to services."

But without housing, it will be tough to keep the homeless healthy and on a track to maximize their independence, she noted.

"As the lodging industry prepares to return to business as usual, the number of places needed to shelter people will rapidly increase, and an unprecedented number of people will find themselves homeless in the town of Middlebury," Von Voorst warned.

Compounding the problem, she noted, is the state's eviction moratorium will end next month, which could result in people who are currently housed in rental properties also becoming homeless.

And affordable housing is almost impossible to find in our area right now, advocates explained.

There are currently 487 subsidized and affordable apartments in Addison County, including 198 for seniors and people with disabilities. The Addison County Community Trust (ACCT) is the county's largest affordable housing provider, with a portfolio of 334 units.

But right now, there's a 186-household waitlist for ACCT housing, which turns over at an annual rate of 10-15%. So roughly 35 units become available during a given year and are quickly gobbled up.

The Charter House Coalition's Middlebury shelter is currently at capacity with 21 guests.

The John W. Graham Emergency Shelter in Vergennes is also fully occupied.



"I don't know if this is solvable with the amount of money available anywhere in the world right now."

— Middlebury Selectman Dan Brown

Von Voorst cited two significant challenges right now: Finding housing in the short-term for those vacating motels and hotels at the end of June, and developing additional permanent affordable housing to meet long-term needs.

BUILDING RULES

Both of these challenges will require resources, land and a supportive community, Von Voorst explained.

Thankfully, state and federal authorities are making more money available for affordable housing, she said. Gov. Phil Scott has proposed spending \$249 million of the state's

federal COVID-19 relief dollars on more affordable housing.

So some say what's really needed right now are sites on which to build the housing and friendly zoning rules to make it possible.

Jeanne Montross is executive director of Helping Poverty's Effects (HOPE), an organization that helps low-income people with food, clothing and bills. HOPE used to own and manage 400 units of affordable housing, so she knows how tough it is to get such units sited and built.

"In my experience... it's been about the zoning issues," she told Middlebury officials. "There are very good reasons for zoning regulations. But we're asking you to relax some of the zoning restrictions, because if we don't do that, we're going to continue to have a lot of homeless people on our streets."

Elise Shanbacker, ACCT executive director, said it can take a long time to site, finance and build an affordable housing project — and time is of the essence right now.

"The motel crisis is happening now, in 2021, and a lot of the solutions — even with this huge influx of money — are realistic for us, but they are going to be longer-term, coming online between 2022 and 2024," she said.

But Shanbacker is encouraged by recent trends made possible by COVID relief funds. It's a revenue stream that last year allowed ACCT to take on four units within Middlebury's Weybridge Street Apartments that will be reserved for low-income individuals with disabilities. Also, ACCT was able

to add three new affordable units to the Kountry Trailer Park in Bristol.

Heidi Lacey, executive director of the Charter House Coalition, urged Middlebury to capitalize on available affordable housing dollars.

"We recognize the affordable housing piece is a long-term challenge; we know this," she said. "But the reality is, we've probably never seen money of this kind floating into Vermont. It would be a shame not to address an issue that has been ongoing for so long, while we have the opportunity."

BEYOND MIDDLEBURY

Middlebury officials said they're willing to help, though the problem, they noted, stretches well beyond Addison County.

"I don't know if this is solvable with the amount of money available anywhere in the world right now," Selectman Dan Brown said.

Middlebury selectboard Chairman Brian Carpenter said he believes a tent city is probably the coalition's best short-term solution for those exiting the motels and hotels.

He asked county coalition members to email specific affordable housing recommendations for the selectboard to consider.

"Housing is a huge issue for us," Carpenter said. "But we have not had the tools in our kit bag. If what you're asking for is money, it's probably not there... If it's the zoning and creating spaces where we could put in affordable housing, I think that's an actionable item."

Meanwhile, it remains to be seen which local motels and hotels elect to remain temporary homeless shelters. Those fitting the bill right now include Middlebury Sweets Motel, the Marriott and the Middlebury Inn.

Blanca Jenne is co-owner of Middlebury Sweets Motel on Route 7 South. She said housing the homeless has provided a key revenue stream for the motel during the pandemic, while also providing a key service to those in need.

Plans call for Middlebury Sweets to continue to allocate four or five of its nine rooms to the state's shelter program.

Jenne acknowledged the past year has had its bumps; guests who broke the motel's rules were not allowed to stay. But overall, it's been a decent arrangement.

"We've always said we're helping with the (homeless) situation, and they're also helping us."

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