

My View: After 35 years, homeless battle continues

KEITH LUEPKE My View
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The 35th birthday of the Welcome Inn, Mankato's shelter for people experiencing homelessness, passed quietly this summer.

I started volunteering at the Welcome Inn during the winter of 1986. Within a few months, I was working there. Mankato was new to me, my partner and I moved from Illinois the previous fall. For that first year in Mankato, my most immediate circle of friends was the staff members, volunteers, and shelter residents.

During the 1980s, Minnesota was in the middle of the "farm crisis," and the economy was slow. There were not enough jobs to go around, and the Welcome Inn was a busy place. We served everyone we could, but the need for shelter was beyond our resources. We turned people away almost every day for lack of available bed-space.

I will never forget the young woman with two children who worked in a nursing home. She read to her two boys every night before they went to bed. She always got them off to school and made it to work on time. Still, it was hard for her to afford housing, food, and life's necessities — in 1985. It is much worse in 2020.



Keith Luebke

I will always remember when drivers brought van-loads of Welcome Inn residents home from long shifts working the Green Giant corn-pack. Speckled with corn, gooey corn sugar, and bits of corn tassels, they trooped in and went straight to bed.

And I will never forget the pregnant teenager who walked to work every morning to do food prep. She stayed at the Inn for weeks after the baby was born. She brought that little girl back to Mankato to see my partner and me as she grew into a toddler and again when she turned sixteen. I did not tell that sixteen year-old that I was changing her diapers when she was a newborn.

Since then, the population of Mankato has increased significantly and, until the pandemic, its economic base was stronger than ever. But in 2020, shelter staff in Mankato are still turning people away for lack of bed-space. That is more than 35 years of turning people away — again, almost every day since 1985.

The Welcome Inn is now in a different building than the 1980s — a smaller building that serves fewer people. Theresa House is also in a different building than when it opened — a smaller building that also serves fewer people. Churches are again organizing to shelter the overflow — as they have off and on for over thirty years.

As a society, we have grown further apart these past four decades. Most people accept the most commonly offered explanation: there are liberals, and there are conservatives, each entrenched in their own set of facts and beliefs.

A few months in a shelter will teach you that life is never that simple. Now, more than ever, Americans, liberal and conservative, live with their screens. Too many have forgotten how to live with real people — people in their frustrating and glorious diversity. The Welcome Inn — when it could hold over thirty people — was a school for how to get along. There were trying times, but it often had a rare sense of community.

In 1986, the primary screen we watched was still a television with cable. The Welcome Inn had a television lounge, and, yes, a smoking lounge. The conversations in the smoking lounge were lively, sometimes intense, and almost always tinged with humor.

In contrast, the television lounge was mostly silent beyond the constant drone of long-forgotten television programs.

To understand homelessness, hanging out in the smoking lounge was the place to be. Conversations between residents, staff, and volunteers were revealing. There were lessons in economics, sociology, philosophy, and much more. All you had to do was listen. Staring at a screen in the television lounge was the last place to be for any real conversations. Too many screens are still doing that to us.

Many conversations were about work. They covered all bases: looking for work, getting to work, relaxing in the lounge after work, and the scarcity of work that paid enough to afford housing beyond the Welcome Inn.

I learned this from years of working in a shelter: many homeless people work harder than most of us. They take care of your children, the elderly, their own families, and often think of themselves last. Sometimes that is what causes them to become homeless.

There are so many memories and so many faces I will never forget. They all deserve more than a few sentences — one last memory: the homeless veteran who came to stay with us every year for a week. Local vets drove him up to the VA hospital for his annual check-up and tests.

Social scientists measure how much scorn we direct toward people who are homeless. And they measure our envy of those who are rich. There are no surprises there.

Thanks to a pandemic, we are beginning to understand who brings the most integrity to their work and lives. They are the workers who care for our old, our sick and make sure we have food. And they certainly don't get paid much for integrity. They end up in shelters when behind in their finances or after hitting some other bump on life's road. But they spring back.

I've seen former Welcome Inn residents graduate with honors from MSU. I've watched them as they find success throughout our community. They are resilient people. I guarantee, many people you interact with each day have experienced or been close to homelessness. But they probably won't mention it.

People experiencing homelessness deserve more than a diminished place in our community. They deserve housing and supportive services. They deserve an opportunity to work, study, or recuperate — or all three at the same time.

Most of all, we need to ensure no one is turned away. We need increased shelter capacity now more than ever. A pandemic reveals the stress the poor feel every day as anxiety moves up the income ladder. The needs of our community always become most apparent during times of social and economic stress.

Our community's shelters prove we can help families help themselves. Stable housing is the first step. But we are in desperate need of more shelter capacity.

Our families experiencing homelessness need help — we failed them. Now is the time to own up to our failures and do the right thing. We must remove the societal barriers to helping all homeless families and individuals.

Keith Luebke co-directed the Welcome Inn during the late 1980s, was executive director of Partners for Affordable Housing from 1997 to 2006 and was director of the Multi-County Housing Authority for four years. He is currently retired.

TRENDING VIDEO

Lemon Glazed Blueberry Tea Bread
