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FEATURED

Address Unknown: Mankato agencies grapple with hidden issue

By Brian Arola barola@mankatofreepress.com

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A man hauls his belongings on his back down Riverfront Drive in Mankato. People experiencing homelessness in the Mankato area are mainly concentrated downtown, although advocates describe them as a hidden population. The total numbers are hard to determine with experts saying homelessness is a bigger issue than many residents realize.

Photos by Pat Christman



The word “hidden” comes up frequently when you ask experts about homelessness in Mankato.

Homelessness here, say those who work with the people experiencing it, doesn’t fit the stereotype of a disheveled panhandler asking for change on a street corner.

Here, it looks like a man taking refuge in a public library knowing he's less likely to be shooed away there. Or a family searching for stability in a shelter after losing everything in a house fire. Or a teen crashing on a friend's couch because home isn't safe.

The general public might not see examples of it unless they know where to look. Its lack of visibility shouldn't be mistaken for nonexistence.

Homelessness happens right here at home, prompting concerted efforts by area agencies to address it.

How it happens

A Christmas Eve fire in 2017 was the first in a series of events leading to Danielle Habisch and her family becoming homeless.

The fire claimed her family's Burnsville home and just about everything in it. She, her fiancé and her two children lived in hotels for months on end while searching for a new place.

"It was devastating, so we're still kind of recuperating from that," Habisch said.

Their move to the children's father's place in Shakopee didn't work out. He was involved in criminal activity, she said, leading to everyone's eviction. The family turned to Mankato's Connections Shelter in October after learning about it from a friend.

They've lived there since, spending their nights playing board games or dominoes. Dakota, 15, and Nyla, 13, are adjusting to new schools, bringing their homework to the shelter.

School districts track student homelessness under the federal McKinney-Vento act. Molly Fox, lead school social worker for Mankato Area Public Schools, said the numbers seem to be rising.

"I would say over the last five years our documentation has increased, our numbers have increased, so our responses have increased," she said. "I'd say it's trending upward."

As of Nov. 1, Mankato Area Public Schools documented 120 students without a permanent residence. As recently as 2013, there were 95.

The Reach Drop-in Center for homeless youth, meanwhile, had more visits in October than in any previous month since opening in 2011. The 315 visits — including youth who visited multiple times — far exceeded the 200 to 250 the nonprofit was averaging.

The increase could be a sign The Reach is becoming more known as a resource for homeless youth. Tasha Moulton, the nonprofit's youth outreach and host home coordinator, said youth homelessness could also be even more prevalent than the numbers show.

"You never know what the true count is," she said. "We've always said they're the invisible population."

Whether overall homelessness is trending upward, downward or staying flat is hard to determine. Agencies are definitely aware of more people experiencing homelessness than they were in the past due to improved tracking methods.

A coalition of nonprofits and government agencies known as the River Valleys Continuum of Care built a coordinated entry list to manage new and existing homeless cases in recent years. The tool connects people experiencing homelessness to services faster, said Andrew Pietsch, Blue Earth County's child support/supportive housing supervisor. Before coordinated entry and the collaboration between agencies coming with it, there was more of an onus on the people experiencing homelessness to find services.

"Prior to coordinated entry, our homeless response system was inadequate," Pietsch said. "It required vulnerable people who were experiencing homelessness to be lucky."

After moving into the shelter, Habisch said she got on the coordinated entry list through the Minnesota Valley Action Council. She's since signed onto waiting lists for emergency shelters and Section 8 subsidized housing.

Both have potentially long wait lists. Jen Theneman, executive director at Partners for Affordable Housing, said it can take between three to nine months for people on the wait list to get into the nonprofit's Welcome Inn and Theresa House shelters in Mankato. Average stays are between 60 to 65 days with a 90-day max.

Habisch and fiancé, Adam Fidelman, said being able to stay together as a family helps them stay positive during the wait. Before coming to Mankato, they couldn't find any openings for the whole family at Twin Cities shelters.

Families face some of the biggest challenges in escaping homelessness. From right, Danielle Habisch, her son, Dakota, daughter, Nyla, and fiance, Adam Fidelman, play dominoes Wednesday night at Connections Shelter. The emergency shelter has about 20 guests per night. Habisch and her family first became homeless after their Burnsville home burned down in late 2017.

Pat Christman

Families experience some of the greatest challenges getting out of homelessness, said Jenn Valimont, Connections Shelter manager.

“It’s very difficult for families when they become homeless to get back right side up, especially families with small children because child care is so expensive here,” she said.

Fidelman works long hours for a basement company to earn money. Habisch wants to start working too once she renews her ID. She doesn’t have an address to use for the forms, so she will have to use the shelter’s.

While he’s at work and the teens are at school, she needs to fill time during the day when the shelter closes. Centenary United Methodist’s Holy Grounds community breakfast and The Salvation Army’s community lunch get her through the early afternoon before she heads to the Blue Earth County Public Library.

Her son and daughter meet her there after class. They'll often stay there until the shelter opens again in the evening.

For entertainment, they'll catch a movie at the cheaper theater downtown. Dakota said he likes Mankato so far, especially compared to Shakopee. And the shelter is much preferable to the hotels they were staying in for awhile.

His mother said she likes the school district's smaller class sizes. She pointed out her daughter is opening up more since coming to Mankato.

Fidelman said he came close to being homeless in the past, but the situation he and Habisch find themselves in is a first for both. Habisch said the judgment homeless people face is hard.

"There are a lot of people that judge you for being homeless or the situation that got you there," she said. "I just hope that people who are experiencing homelessness can find support."

Valimont said people experiencing homelessness in Mankato have trouble finding places where they're welcome during the day. Establishing a day shelter, as has been discussed, would help, she said.

"On those very, very cold days, anywhere they go to find shelter they're at risk of hearing, 'I'm sorry, you can't stay here,'" she said.

Multiple people experiencing homelessness in Mankato said they're not always told this nicely. They said some downtown indoor spaces remove benches and chairs in the winter to make it less accommodating for people seeking shelter from the elements.

Being somewhere they're not welcome risks interactions with law enforcement. Any fines or criminal charges would only compound the person's situation, pushing them deeper into homelessness.

The River Valleys Continuum of Care's 2018 survey found criminal history is one of the most significant barriers to clients accessing and maintaining housing. Lack of affordable housing and jobs paying living wages, poor or limited rental histories, and mental and physical health conditions were among the others.

Guests wait for the Connections homeless shelter at Covenant Family Church to open in October. The shelter is one of several serving Mankato's homeless population, along with The Salvation Army's men's shelter, Partners for Affordable Housing and other agencies.

Pat Christman

Despite the barriers, many people staying in Mankato's shelters do end up finding housing. Connections has success stories, as does The Salvation Army, Partners for Affordable Housing, Committee Against Domestic Abuse and other agencies.

Leslie Johnson, Salvation Army's business director, said two men staying in the nonprofit's men's shelter have moved into housing since it opened in early November.

Erica Koser, a pastor at Centenary United Methodist who co-directs Connections with Bethlehem Lutheran pastor Collette Broady Grund, said there's been progress in finding more shelter guests permanent housing.

"Certainly in the last three years we've worked really closely (on that)," she said. "We've had an uptick in people being able to find housing."

A tight housing market makes it difficult for others, more so than in other Minnesota regions. Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies found the Mankato-North Mankato area had the highest share of cost-burdened renters in the state.

The study defined cost burdened as renters who pay more than 30% of their incomes on housing. Mankato-North Mankato had 51% of renters paying at least that much for housing in 2017. Another 24% were severely cost burdened, spending more than 50% of income on housing.

Wages not keeping up with the cost of housing and other expenses are a clear driver of area homelessness, Theneman said.

“It’s a perpetual problem and it’s not getting any easier because the housing inventory is so limited,” she said.

Pietsch called affordable housing a key cog in addressing homelessness.

“Unless we address affordable housing in our region, I don’t think we’ll really be able to prevent or end homelessness,” he said.

Getting a grasp

The nature of homelessness makes putting a number on how many people are truly experiencing it at a given time near impossible. Annual point-in-time counts and separate studies done every few years attempt to measure homelessness at regional levels, but the number is more a snapshot of who agencies identify as homeless at a given time.

“No matter how we assess it and what kind of data we collect, we do not have a good grasp of how many people are homeless,” Theneman said.

Part of the challenge is how in flux the number becomes on a day-to-day basis. For every formerly homeless family finding housing, an individual could be getting evicted.

Not everyone sleeping on a friend’s couch thinks of themselves as homeless. Adding to the complications, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development doesn’t consider doubling up or couch hopping as homeless, but the state does.

The last available snapshot from Wilder Research’s 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study found 589 total people experiencing homelessness in southeast Minnesota — a 20-county region stretching from Brown County south to the Iowa border and east all the way to the Wisconsin border. More local data are harder to come by, so counting how many people use the various shelters is an imperfect way to get a better idea.

Looking at the separate 2017 and 2018 point-in-time counts, Pietsch said the numbers stayed fairly flat in the region. There was a bigger increase in people staying in emergency shelters — several communities in the Mankato area added shelters around that time frame — a decrease in people in transitional housing and a slight rise in unsheltered people.

On top of the school district and The Reach's numbers on youth homelessness, Partners' two Mankato shelters have 32 people staying in them. Its new St. Peter shelter has another 15.

The Salvation Army's men's shelter had 10 guests this week and peaked at 18 since its season's opening. Connections sees about 20 per night, including two families besides the Habisches.

The available numbers for Mankato could include some overlap. Taking into account the people who don't have shelter, aren't known to the system, or only see themselves as temporarily homeless while doubling up with friends or family, it's fair to say the actual scope of homelessness in Mankato is more extensive than most residents realize.

For this reason, Koser said it's important to continue raising awareness.

"I think it's really easy for people to dismiss it because they don't see it all the time, so one issue we face is just constantly raising awareness," she said.

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Mankato's sheltered homelessness by the numbers

Connections Shelter: 20 current guests

Salvation Army's men's shelter: 10 current guests

Theresa House and Welcome Inn: 32 current guests

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