

PAH: Adequate housing is critical in our local communities

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Adequate housing is critical for local jobs and strong economies, essential to students' success in school, and vital to positive health outcomes.

The statewide evidence, however, reveals that there is not enough affordable housing available in Minnesota. Housing is considered affordable when it consumes 30% or less of a household income. Nicollet and Blue Earth counties are considered cost-burdened and extremely cost-burdened, respectively, with 18% to 30% of residents spending more than one third of their income on housing.

Many people facing housing instability do not consider themselves homeless. Couch-hopping, the term for staying with friends or family temporarily, and then moving onto another, has become common. Others are living in vehicles, storage units, tents, ice

houses and other places not intended for human habitation.

What causes people to lose stable housing? The reasons vary, but some of the most common include: broken vehicle or other transportation issues; a lost job; an illness or injury at work; separation or divorce; family illness; chemical dependency; mental illness; lack of childcare.

The Minnesota Housing Partnership's 2019 State of the State's Housing study showed that more than a quarter of Minnesota families pay more than they can afford for housing. Over 14,000 individuals live at or below the poverty level in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, according to the US Census Bureau.

Availability of affordable rental units remains ever challenging, as rent and home values rise while income for families either declines or remains stagnant. Rent in Nicollet County has increased by 20%, while income has decreased by 5%. Blue Earth County is similar, with an 18% increase in rent and 6% decrease in income.

As an effort to help communities address issues related to housing and homelessness, coordinated effort exists between nearly 200 agencies in the state to provide different levels and types of shelter. The Continuum of Care (CoC) was created by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1994. The network of agencies uses the same Coordinated Entry process, an intake and assessment tool to address homelessness and more quickly connect them to resources statewide.

Partners for Affordable Housing (PAH) has been addressing housing barriers in southern Minnesota since 1985, starting with the opening of Welcome Inn Transitional Living Center in Mankato. In 2009, the Theresa House, formerly operated by Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church, merged with the Welcome Inn to form the partnership currently known as Partners for Affordable Housing. Since that time, PAH has added transitional housing services and permanent housing for 31 families in Mankato.

With the October 2019 opening of Union Street Place (USP) in St. Peter, PAH has made available additional emergency housing to seven families at a time, for up to 90 days. USP also has month-to-month rentals with no application fees or rental deposit requirements.

Funding for these programs comes from multiple streams, including federal, state and county grants, rental income, private donations and fundraising events. Community members interested in providing support may consider making monetary donations that can be used to address ever-changing immediate needs including cleaning supplies, transportation, small appliances, personal hygiene supplies, bedding or disposable items for infants and toddlers.

At PAH shelters, prioritization is given to single women, families with children, and women fleeing domestic violence. Single men may find shelter with other agencies in Mankato. PAH staff partner with other community organizations in order to best serve their guests and clients, connecting them to food, clothing and hygiene needs. Each shelter has laundry accommodations, as well as a shared space with couches, television, and a computer in order to make life a little bit more normal. In the last year, PAH provided 9,200 bed-space nights. Despite the number of guests served, the demand is still great, with more than 20 calls and emails per day, and no vacancies. People seeking emergency shelter should fill out an online application at partnersforhousing.org/shelter.

Kirsten Becker is the communications manager for Partners for Affordable Housing, which works on housing issues in the area, including Nicollet, Le Sueur and Blue Earth counties.

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