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EDITOR'S PICK

Spear: Homeless project part of public service

Aug 30, 2020

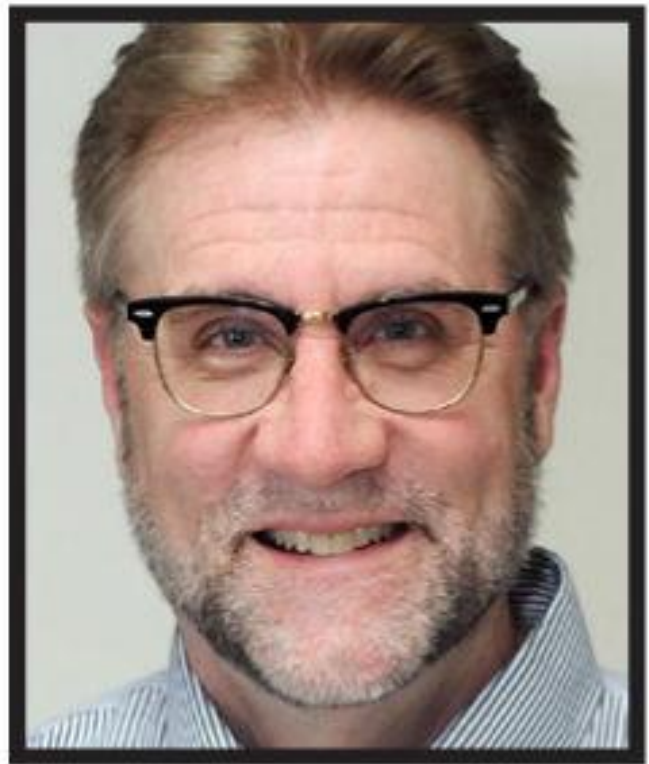


Public service remains a hallmark of Free Press journalism, and we see it as an even more important mission now as communities grapple with social and economic upheaval in the era of COVID-19.

Before COVID hit here in March, The Free Press had been engaged in a public service journalism project for several months. About a year ago, reporters and editors met with leaders of agencies, volunteer organizations and faith groups that served the homeless to find out what we could do as public service for our community to address the homeless problem.

We've made good progress shining light on the problem, but our journalism also has supported real community results.

We led off our "[Address Unknown](#)" series just before Thanksgiving in 2019 with an in-depth story on the scope of the homelessness in the Mankato region. We tried to quantify the



**JOE
SPEAR**
The Free Press

number of homeless people in the region and found that wasn't an easy task. Homeless people don't sign up to be counted.

But we did find numbers from homeless shelters such as the Welcome Inn and Connections Shelter. The Mankato Area Public Schools also track the number of students who are homeless as does the Wilder Foundation.

The first story, written by reporter Brian Arola, found that 120 students in Mankato schools were considered homeless, about 20 percent higher than in the recent past. The Reach homeless resource center for youth had 315 visits in October alone, far above the typical 250.

We found the waiting list to get into the Welcome Inn and Theresa House homeless shelters could be three to nine months, with average stays of 60 to 65 days. The two shelters average about 32 people a night. Connections housed about 20 people a night, while Salvation Army had 10 and a St. Peter shelter housed 15 per night.

The Wilder Foundation reported 589 people experiencing homelessness in 20 area counties in 2018.

We also profiled a number of homeless people and families to understand the circumstances that made them homeless. They didn't fit the stereotype of the street-corner panhandler. Some had escaped abuse and others lost housing to circumstances beyond their control like a fire. There were singles, married couples and families.

The Rev. Erica Koser of Centenary United Methodist Church, who is co-director of Connections Shelter, told us our coverage made a difference.

"The Free Press has been instrumental in helping get the word out about Connections. I think the feature pieces that were run brought a significant amount of awareness in the community about homelessness and also helped us providers to see where some of the gaps continue to be as well as where we are doing things well," she wrote in an email.

"Anytime Connections has a feature article, we see a bump in Facebook page interaction as well as a bump in donations. That awareness is crucial to us, especially right now."

A second story in December focused on how resources for the homeless programs are always stretched thin and gave insights into the efforts community members and organizations have made to support the homeless.

Partners for Affordable Housing, which operates the Welcome Inn and Theresa House, continues to be at capacity for all its shelters and housing, said Jen Theneman, executive director. The COVID pandemic prevented the group from holding two fundraisers this year, and federal funding for transitional housing remains flat year after year.

She said The Free Press shed light on the problem that many people didn't think existed in Mankato. Our stories also shattered some stereotypes of homeless people.

The Free Press Editorial Board also advocated in an editorial for the community to support organizations that serve the homeless.

Examining those affected by homeless, we published the story of young single mom and her baby who were assisted by housing programs and The Reach.

As the COVID crisis hit in March, our staff was redirected to the hundreds of pandemic-related stories that awaited us, and we had to put some homeless stories on the backburner.

But homeless advocates continued to work toward solutions and were happy to announce a new plan for a homeless shelter for this winter at the First Presbyterian Church. Connections will be adding 10 beds in its new space and opening Oct. 5. The Salvation Army also agreed to partner with Connections Shelter for a "day and night coverage" shelter plan for the upcoming winter.

These are tremendous accomplishments that represent significant progress in addressing the region's homeless problem.

But there is still much work to be done, as Koser notes:

"We need a year-round shelter. Summer provides a big challenge to our homeless population as shelters are closed, and right now many of the resources that they normally rely on (the library, the Sal, cafes) are not available for respite during the day.

“Connections is working to be able to provide a year-round shelter, but to get there, we need to raise a considerable amount of money and will need continued community support. COVID has allowed us to work more closely with the city and county and I am hoping that partnership continues as we continue to move forward.”

The Mankato area community has made this happen, and The Free Press has been a willing and able partner. We look forward to continuing our efforts in public service journalism working with a community that cares.


Joe Spear is editor of The Free Press. Contact him at 344-6382 or jspear@mankatofreepress.com. Follow on Twitter @jfspear.

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