



Advocates: more affordable housing, homelessness support needed in Mankato

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MANKATO — Local advocates called on lawmakers to keep affordable housing and homelessness support funding near the top of their priority lists during a virtual town hall Tuesday.

The Minnesota Coalition of the Homeless invited area legislators to the event, which drew dozens of leaders and staff from area nonprofits. Advocates voiced their needs on housing and homelessness to Sen. Nick Frenzt, DFL-North Mankato.

From housing programs to support services to more affordable options, it'll take sustained funding to address local housing issues, said Jen Theneman, executive director of Partners for Housing.

“We’ve appreciated additional funding for a variety of funding options and look forward to that having an impact,” she said. “But we also (need) continued help with that, because it’s going to take a long time to really solve the housing issues we have in the community.”

Only a few housing developments get funded at a time, she pointed out, and usually only a portion of them are set aside for residents with low income. Other attendees shared their frustrations at seeing luxury housing developments pop up, which make profits for private companies while doing nothing for affordable housing shortages.

Theneman's proposals included more support for affordable developments, additional programs like housing choice vouchers, adding transitional housing options, and better funding for homeless shelters.

"People don't just have one type of issue with housing," she said. "Everyone's story is unique, so a variety of options is important to meet people where they're at."

Even from a purely fiscal perspective, Frentz said, investing in homelessness prevention makes sense.

"Reducing homelessness saves a ton of money for the state, in particular health care," he said.

Concerns about short-term costs often outweigh the potential benefits of long-term investments during legislative disagreements. Frentz said the pitch to other lawmakers would have to be about how investments will bring economic benefits to the state over a five-, 10- or even 50-year period.

More support for young people experiencing homelessness also came up, as did the growing discrepancy between wages and costs of living.

Young people looking for housing sometimes need double the rental fee and double the security deposit fee on hand to have a chance at renting a place, said Tasha Moulton, senior program manager at The Reach, a youth homelessness nonprofit in Mankato.

"When we're trying to get people into housing, we're talking about \$1,800, \$2,400 just to get them in the building," she said.

Multiple attendees said there's enough money out there to fix homelessness and affordable housing shortages. It's just not prioritized as it should be.

Locally, so much funding for causes is driven by donor self-interest rather than what has the most needs, said Nancy M. Fitzsimons, a social work professor at Minnesota State University. The "givers" then get elevated to hero-like status in the media, she continued, despite not addressing the most pressing issues.

She called for the Legislature to do more to ensure cities use sales tax dollars on issues like housing rather than less necessary projects. If not, cities will keep finding new projects to fund in the interest of economic development, she said.

The advocates implored Frenz and other lawmakers to keep focusing on housing issues, and keep in communication with the people working on them at local levels.

Frenz encouraged them to keep the suggestions coming. Voicing them during testimonies to legislative committees, he said, is one of the most compelling ways to get messages out to more lawmakers.

"If we had more people in Minnesota like the people on this call," he said, "we'd be better off as a state."