

Homeless in Allegan City - A closer look

By Leslie Ballard

The word homeless often conjures up images of panhandlers begging on city street corners or people huddled under overpasses or sleeping in store doorways. It may also evoke images of the tent cities in San Francisco or Los Angeles recently seen on TV.

People don't think of homelessness as a rural issue, something that happens in our own small towns and communities in southwest Michigan because it's not visible, not obvious. Unfortunately, it does. Here in Allegan County.

How many are homeless in Allegan County? It is difficult to get an accurate assessment for a number of reasons. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandates a Point In Time (PIT) count to document individuals and families experiencing homelessness on a single day during the last 10 days in January each year. This number provides a snapshot for counties to assess how many individuals are sheltered (emergency shelter or transitional housing) and unsheltered (street count).

The Numbers

The PIT count for January 27, 2022 revealed

40 homeless individuals in Allegan County, but Katrina Pelfrey, Local Planning Body Coordinator, asserts "At any given time, there could be more or fewer than this number." One of the challenges with the 2022 PIT was the limited number of volunteers available to conduct the count as Covid rates spiked in January. Another challenge comes as "some unhoused people want to remain anonymous and not be counted," note Pelfrey. "Our volunteers are aware that some of the unsheltered people they will encounter prefer not to interact with them or remain anonymous and this can make it challenging to obtain an accurate count."

The 2020 PIT count showed 69 sheltered or unsheltered homeless people, and that number dropped to 31 in 2021. Pelfrey explained that the emergency funding from the government to individuals and the moratorium on evictions were believed to be responsible for that drop. Now that those programs are ending, she expects the figures to return to the pre-Covid numbers.

Allegan County data for Category 1 (not meant for human habitation such as living in campgrounds or forests in tents, campers, or



cars) and Category 2 (precariously housed meaning housing will be lost within 14 days and the individual or family has no resources to find other housing) have dropped from 247 in 2019 to 109 in 2021. Again, that decline was due to the funding and eviction moratorium mentioned previously.

Local Organizations

The Allegan County Local Planning Body (LBP) is a coalition of over 20 Allegan County agencies working together to provide access to housing and services for people precariously housed or those experiencing homelessness.

Their goal is to ensure that homelessness in Allegan County is rare, brief and one time. These agencies provide housing and housing services, some of which provide wrap around services which include food, clothing, temporary shelter, education, etc.

"It's an all-hands-on-deck effort," Pelfrey noted. "We have a great group of agencies, and we are evolving our collaboration."

They are a committee of the Michigan Balance of State Continuum of Care, which represents 61 of Michigan's most rural counties to HUD. The Al-

legan County LBP works with various state agencies and partners who make up a homeless response system.

On Point (formerly known as Allegan County Community Mental Health) manages the Housing Assessment & Resources Agency (HARA) and the Housing Assessment Program (HAP), which provide eligibility screening, housing assessment, information and referral services and case management.

Challenges

Part of the challenge of rural homelessness is that it is not as visible as in urban areas, so PIT numbers don't always reflect the extent of the problem. Rural areas also have more limited resources than their urban counterparts. Pelfrey is proud of "How much we can do with limited resources."

In Allegan County some current challenges to ending homelessness include a lack of affordable housing and the lack of immediate and safe shelter options for Category 1 individuals and families.

According to the April 7, 2021 Rural Monitor, in largely rural areas, of all unsheltered people "39% are families with children,

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and of individual homeless, 33% are somewhat more likely to be women.”

A 2018 report from the University of Chicago

Chapin Institute “found that rural youth homelessness was equal to that in urban areas. However, in rural areas the problem

was much more likely to be hidden due to activities like couch surfing (staying overnight with friends). Additionally, rural youth experiencing homelessness faced more challenges in accessing social service, jobs, and education.”

If you know of homeless individuals or families in

either Category 1 or 2, please call the HAP line as 269-686-4703 or e-mail housing@onpointallegan.org

Next week: A look at the local agencies who play a role in addressing Allegan County’s homelessness problem.

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Pullman housing needs- one house at a time



A crew from Keller-Williams Realty in Holland put the finishing touches on the landscaping at one of the houses Hank renovated for People Helping People in Pullman.

By Gari Voss

It began as something to do in retirement... It grew into paying forward the love and care others had shown in the past.

Hank and his wife Phyllis attended service one Sunday, which is their norm. What was different was their introduction to People Helping People (PHP), a non-profit that was working with people in the community of Pullman, MI. The couple decided to participate in the PHP Thursday evening activities at what was then the LOVE, Inc. building.

The couple continued working with this ministry, and became involved in providing free meals along with Bible Study. The more they participated, the more active they became in assisting with activities. The more interaction they had with the group and people of Pullman, the more they identified and understood the needs of the community.

Realizing the needs, Hank's memories of his younger years and his skills as a hands-on businessman began to formulate solutions. PHP had identified the need to have their own spaces. They constructed the Linking Center (named by students at Pullman Elementary School) and began after-school programs. With classrooms for completing homework with tutors, a full-sized gym, a licensed kitchen, and even a shop, the possibilities were endless.

PHP also purchased

the Lee Township Community Center and began using it for Bible Study groups and worship. Then there was the purchase of an unkempt piece of property adjacent to the Linking Center and Worship Center. But the projects that propelled Hank into a new realm of opportunity was the purchase of a ranch style home adjacent to PHP's property.

Housing is a huge concern of many communities. But meeting the need includes numerous aspects to consider. There is not only attaining a house, but caring for the building, inside and outside, over time so it becomes a home. How could this need be met in this rural community?

Hank had a growing network of people, businesses and other organizations. He began reaching out beyond PHP and decided to strike out on his own ventures.

Just as a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, creating housing begins one building or piece of property at a time. That is how Hank viewed the need. Looking around the community, he was able to identify houses that had been long neglected, but could be renovated and restored to their original form or razed to open a piece of property for an alternative structure.

"I identify property according to availability and affordability, which is difficult to do these days," Hank pointed out.

Conversations were held with organizations like Habitat for Humanity of Holland and with friends, colleagues and church members. Renovations of properties began.

As of June 2022, Hank has been instrumental in preparing seven houses. Each home is sold for the original purchase price plus the cost of making repairs and improvements. The new "owners" rent for the first year and must follow a list of rules. Displaying knowledge of and skills for home ownership is required to complete the purchase.

"A coach walks alongside the new owners assisting them with home care, budgeting and cleanliness. Some things are as simple as having garbage service. At the end of the year, the residents may purchase the home beginning with a \$5,000 down payment. We work with each family to assist them in becoming homeowners," Hank explained.

Hank understands that when people help each other wonderful things can happen. After a difficult childhood where he lost his dad at age 2 then his mom began fighting cancer when he was 9, he had to make many life choices. The kids basically raised each other. Thanks to the church and county food distributions, he became aware of how people could assist others.

One person who influenced Hank was Dave who bought food for his family on a regular basis and paid the oil bill for a year. That display of generosity had a long-term impact on how Hank viewed the way he would like to mold his life.

At 16, Hank left high school to work and by 18 was working at Omni Die & Engineering. At 32, he graduated from high school. Through hard work, Hank went from being a worker to co-owner

of Omni, and now has moved into retirement.

Knowing that retirement would be difficult, Hank looked for something to fill his time. When People Helping People made the presentation at church, Hank was hooked. On Monday, he went to the dentist; on Tuesday, he toured Pullman; on Wednesday, he began work; and on Thursday night, he was at church in Pullman serving hot meals to anyone in the community who came through the doors.

With others, Hank has gained a myriad of skills. "I was a member of a group of guys who started a stock club 35 years ago. Four of the seven are still involved and meet once a month. We were rather successful and began giving a percentage away each year. This began a routine for reaching out."

Hank believed, "Faith is expressed through love, and we need to spread a blanket over a few more people who want to build a relationship with Christ."

Jerry, a friend and colleague, became attracted to PHP through church and his friendship with Hank. "I was impressed with what PHP had done. The church was helping people with the details of life. Hank has become my hero. He is an amazing person - a businessman, husband and father - with a big heart."

As a member of the Keller-Williams Realty Team, Jerry took a tour of Pullman and witnessed the work of Hank and PHP. At the end of the day, he decided to come back to help. Jerry began to include other members of his team. On their annual Red Day when employees go out in the community to volunteer,

agents from the office contribute time to landscape houses that are being prepared to rent.

"Several members of Keller-Williams have returned to assist with other projects," Jerry shared. "In Proverbs, there is a passage that states we should help a person whenever possible. That is how I would like to spend my time. I work with a great group of people who are encouraging to be around, and this is a company that established Keller-Williams Cares. They respond to needs such as assisting the families in Texas with funeral expenses and encouraging employees to volunteer in their communities."

Hank admits that finding volunteers is at times a challenge, but most days of the week, he is in meetings or organizing work in the field. Through a variety of methods, volunteers arrive at worksites. Being involved in the work and seeing the metamorphosis, volunteers feel a sense of pride and accomplishment.

A need in Pullman is being addressed one house and one family at a time with support that assists the new residents in making it a home for life. Jeff, one of the key leaders of PHP and just one of Hank's admirers, described what has occurred, "Hank has made

life choices that have affected many."

Some of these choices have been because of a feeling of obligation to his family beginning with his mom and siblings, some have been in his professional life, but all have been through love beginning with how he witnessed God's Love working through others to help his family.

Today in "retirement", Hank takes his Love of God and the wonderful work of Christ in his life into the world to help others.

For Hank, tackling the housing problem began one house and one family at a time. Renovate a structure, identify a family, then teach them how to become homeowners. The mentoring and teaching become essential elements for successfully turning a house into a home and building the skills necessary for ownership.

There have been many who have tried to solve the housing problem by sinking millions, if not billions, into large projects, but then they walk away leaving the new "owners" with limited skills needed for successful home ownership. Maybe "build it so they will come" requires some additional thinking. Maybe it requires an on-going relationship that propagates change.



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