

Housing Services Panel discusses way to alleviate homelessness

Part 2 of a 3 part series

By Leslie Ballard

Eight organizations came together on a Zoom presentation hosted by the Allegan County Multi-Agency Collaborative Council (MACC) and the Allegan County Local Planning Body (LPB) to describe the services they provide and to discuss gaps in services, challenges and their vision to make homelessness in Allegan County rare, brief and nonrecurring.

Seventy people attended the June 22 event during which the Allegan County Housing Services Panel provided an extremely informative overview of their services and the nature of the situation in the county for unhoused people.

According to Kessie Karg, MACC Coordinator, the purpose of the meeting was “to bring housing service experts together in one spot to give the community a baseline for where we stand with what’s available to us right now – we know we have a long way to go for the big picture of housing, and this is just one piece of the whole big puzzle. We wanted to give people the foundational knowledge of what resources currently exist for Allegan County residents, as well as gaps in services and

LPB Agency List 06/2022

Allegan AESA

www.alleganaesa.org / 269-512-7700

Allegan County Offices

www.allegancounty.org / 269-673-0205

Allegan County Homeless Assistance Program (HAP)

Managed by OnPoint

www.onpointallegan.org/housing-assistance

HAP line: 269-686-4703

Email: housing@onpointallegan.org

Allegan County United Way

www.acuw.org / 269-673-6545

Allegan Friend of the Court

www.allegancounty.org / 877-543-2660

Allegan Homeless Solutions

www.alleganhomelessolutions.org / 269-686-4703

CARES Southwest Michigan

www.caresswm.org / 269-381-2437

Catholic Charities Diocese of Kalamazoo

www.ccdok.org / 269-381-9800

Christian Neighbors SE

www.christianneighbors.org / 269-685-4166

Community Action of Allegan County

www.communityactionallegan.org / 269-673-5472

Gryphon Place 2-1-1

www.gryphon.org / 269-381-1510

KENT ISD

www.kentisd.org / 616-364-1333

Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity

www.lakeshorehabitat.org / 616-393-8001

Love In the Name of Christ

www.loveincnwa.org / 269-751-2533

OnPoint (Formerly known as Allegan County Community Mental Health Services)

www.onpointallegan.org

24/7 crisis line: 1-888-354-0596

People Helping People (Fennville, Pullman)

www.phppullman.org / 269-236-2001

Project Hope (Dorr & NE Allegan Cty)

www.projecthope-dorr.org / 616-681-4673

Martin Resource Center

www.martinresource.org / 269-672-5605

Resilience (Allegan)

www.resiliencemi.org / 24 hour help line:

English: 1-800-848-5991 / Spanish: 1-866-728-2131

Salvation Army (Plainwell)

www.grandrapids.satruck.org / 888-868-9305

Sylvia's Place (Only DV shelter in AC)

www.sylviasplace.com

24 hour crisis line: 269-673-8700 or 888-411-7837

Volunteers of America

www.voami.org

West Michigan Works

www.westmiworks.org / 269-686-5079

70x7 Life Recovery

www.70x7liferecovery.org / 616-796-0685

populations served.”

What exactly does the Allegan County MACC do? It is a “collaborative group of health and human service agencies engaging in new ideas to improve service delivery, bridge gaps in services, reduce duplication. There are more than 50 members of the Allegan County MACC representing social service organizations, non-profits, schools, county government, law enforcement, health, and businesses. Over 3000 residents have received housing assistance, free health services, free mental health services, and improved school readiness skills as a result of coordinated efforts among agencies.”

The Allegan County LPB

partners with over 20 organizations and agencies, and eight representatives of these nonprofits spoke with passion about a current state of affairs that requires coordinated and community wide action throughout the county but that can be remedied if all sectors, including individuals, work together.

Panelists

Moderator Randy Korterger, Interim President of the United Way of Ottawa and Allegan Counties, introduced the panelists, beginning with Susan Conrad, Housing Services Supervisor for OnPoint (formerly Allegan County Community Mental Health).

OnPoint is the Housing Assessment Resource Agency (HARA) and the Homeless

Assistance Program (HAP) for Allegan County and thus interacts with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). They work with both the unhoused population as well as the precariously housed (losing their current housing in 14-21 days). They assess their clients socially as well as financially to determine their situation. This includes looking at their employment circumstances as people who are unhoused may have jobs but they do not pay enough to enable them to afford housing.

Krista Bosma, Case Manager for Sylvia's Place, works

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with women and children who are trying to escape domestic violence, providing them with emergency shelter and ongoing assistance. They also work with individuals in Van Buren County, which does not have a shelter for those experience domestic violence.

Community Action of Allegan County (CAAC) Executive Director Lisa Evans spoke of the services they provide for all ages as they work to serve, advocate and engage the entire community in issues about poverty and poverty prevention. Their client base is comprised of people who meet the federal definition of poverty and the Asset Limited Income-Constrained Employed (ALICE). According to the recent census, these two groups make up @36% of the county's population.

In terms of their housing services, they do weatherization, and rental and mortgage assistance. They have also created a WorkX program which trains individuals interested in pre-apprenticeship certification in construction to help with weatherization and building homes. They also address blight remediation as low-income families are unable to maintain their homes.

CAAC provided 350 people with crisis utility assistance last year as well as many other services.

Toni Newell, Chief Operations Office for The Ark Youth Shelter (part of Catholic Charities Diocese of Kalamazoo) described the work they do with homeless and runaway youth. While the shelter is in Kalamazoo, anyone in Allegan County can seek services from them. In addition to the shelter where they served 80-100 youths last year, they have a drop-in program and an independent living facility for 17-21 year olds.

Executive Director Don Wilkinson spoke of the lack of affordable starter homes and the high rents (often \$1,000 a month) that often hinder even working families to find a home. He reported that Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity

has helped almost 700 people find housing in the last 30 years. In addition to building homes, they help their clients understand the financial and physical responsibilities of home ownership and provide 0% interest mortgages.

Jean Eding, Life Skills/Homes of Hope Director for Love in the Name of Christ (Love Inc.), spoke of their transition program, using church-owned homes to give their clients time to rest, heal and plan as they experience extreme stress. The largest populations they serve are single parents with 3-4 children and people aged 50 or above. She believes churches throughout the county should be more involved.

Housing Program Director for Christian Neighbors SE, Kim Shafer, described their housing stabilization program in Kalamazoo and Allegan counties and how their education classes help people stay in their homes. They also provide many resources such as financial assistance with rent and utilities. Christian Neighbors estimates that they help 350 families annually with some type of housing.

Theresa Bray, Co-Founder and Board President of Allegan Homeless Solutions, talked about their efforts to prevent homelessness as well as providing homes in Allegan and surrounding counties. She expressed concerns about the disabled who are in dire need of services but are not yet getting benefits because of their issues with literacy or computer skills and of the vulnerability of veterans who can find the process of attaining benefits re-traumatizing.

This is a very brief summary of what these organizations do and does not include those LPB partners who were not on the panel. The work of these organizations and the impact they have each year are remarkable. While it would be easy to become discouraged at the extent of the needs in the county, they maintain their passion and commitment to ensuring that

people have safe and affordable housing.

Challenges

What are the challenges we face in eliminating homelessness?

The lack of affordable housing was a recurrent theme during the panel. Eding commented that “many are always waiting for subsidized housing. There’s not as much subsidized housing as people think.” In addition, housing application fees and security deposits can be out of reach for those who need housing most. While many agencies offer rental assistance, those funds sometimes go unused because of the limited housing.

Bringing down construction costs is another issue. Wilkinson estimates that even with the number of volunteers Habitat for Humanity has, it costs an estimated \$230,000 to build a 1300 square foot starter home.

The red tape involved to get state or federal assistance can be daunting for many and takes a great deal of time, delaying much needed support. Several of the agencies above provide help with this and report the frustration they feel at how cumbersome and slow the process can be.

Many people in the poverty or ALICE categories have no reliable transportation or any at all, which makes getting or holding a job difficult, especially when coupled with the dearth of day care in the county.

Allegan County has no homeless shelter which is especially troubling in the heart of winter. While there are shelters in Holland and Kalamazoo, getting there can be impossible due to lack of transportation. While some agencies provide hotel vouchers for emergency shelter, hotels are not always willing to provide rooms to unhoused people.

The stigma of homeless individuals or families is another barrier. The ideas that being homeless is “their fault” or the result of laziness or that some people want to be homeless and “live off the government” is very different than the reality the people who work with the homeless see. As Eding points out, the majority come from generational poverty and “desire a better future for themselves and their children.”

For many organizations, funding can be a challenge in their efforts to help people from becoming homeless as well as those who are. They work to obtain grant monies and hold fundraisers, but donations are always needed.

The bottom line according to Conrad: “How do we figure out how to put the pieces together before they get to be homeless?”

There’s Hope

More funding for mental health programs is becoming available. As Newell has observed in her work with the Ark, “young people are coming in with very compli-

cated mental health histories.” Adults as well are in this situation, especially as living in poverty creates extreme stress and can cause learning problems as well as other issues.

Michigan has begun creating its Statewide Housing Plan, but advocacy is still needed. Simplifying the processes to receive state and federal assistance would enable agencies to provide help in more timely and efficient ways and prevent problems from worsening.

Shafer hopes to begin working with landlords to educate and mediate with them to break down the stigma of renting to people with a history of homelessness, mental health or criminal history (usually substance abuse).

While Wilkinson believes no one size fits all solution exists for the housing situation, “the Southwest Michigan community is a great place to live and our communities want to help.” He cited the benefits to the community of finding affordable housing for the unhoused. “Owners of the Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity homes paid an estimated \$300,000 in taxes and had children in public schools which receive funding based on student count.”

Kortering described the efforts in Holland that have shown excellent results and suggested that Allegan County might look to the Housing Next program as a model.

What you can do

The first thing we all can do to help alleviate homelessness is to educate ourselves about these issues and the organizations working to address them.

We can start by subscribing to receive the monthly E-Newsletter from the Allegan County MACC and requesting the Housing Services Resource packet. This can be done by emailing Kessie Karg at alleganmacc@gmail.com.

Donating to the organizations listed above and on the LPB Agency List will help them continue to accomplish results in the great work they are doing.

Volunteering with these organizations can also make a difference. Contact them to see how you can use your skills and time to make a difference.

Advocating for legislation that will support the populations being served. Watch the social media and websites of organizations, especially United Way, Community Action, and OnPoint for advocacy information and opportunities. Legislators don’t always take an issue seriously until their constituents tell them to do so.

Ensuring that homelessness is indeed rare, brief and nonrecurring will take the whole community coming together to move people out of poverty and to build a better Allegan County.