



Who are the Homeless in Allegan County?

Part 3 of a series

By Leslie Ballard

Who are the homeless in southwest Michigan? It's not the man standing on the intersection corner with the sign asking for help.

It's typically a single parent with three children, the oldest of whom is 7 years old.

It's senior citizens on incomes so fixed they can be described as broken.

It's domestic violence survivors, trying to escape from abuse against themselves as well as their children.

It's youth whose parents have kicked them out or who have run away from bad situations.

It's people with mental health issues or substance abuse problems who struggle to find the way out of circumstances.



And according to several of the local agencies, many if not most of them work.

So how does this happen?

As Susan Conrad, Housing Services Supervisor for OnPoint (formerly Allegan County Community Mental Health) explains, "housing can become unstable very quickly if something unexpected happens, and if they are lacking the financial and social supports, such as family, they find themselves in situations they never thought they would be in."

She spoke of several cases she has dealt with recently of fairly young people who had jobs, were successful and had a career path. Then something happened – illness that required long term recuperation or injury that meant they could no longer perform the job they had been trained to do.

If they have a high deductible on their health insurance or have to apply for disability, which is a long process and means payments don't begin for awhile, and they don't have family members who are in a position to help them, they have no income so they lose their housing.

They perhaps try couch surfing for awhile with friends. Also known as a form of double housing, couch surfing can get old for both parties quickly. Jean Eding Life Skills/Homes of Hope Director of Love Inc.,

points out that "when people are double-housed, of course there is going to be conflict."

When that happens, these young people were left with the options of living on the streets, in tents or in their cars.

"It's heartbreaking," Conrad observed. "They are not accustomed to asking for help and often feel like a failure. They're trying to figure out these big life changes while needing to be warm and fed and safe while doing it, but they weren't in a situation where they could effectively manage that."

Kim Shafer, Housing Program Director at Christian Neighbors, concurs that navigating the system to receive benefits is a "huge challenge." She recalls an older man with a disabled adult son who used to come to the food pantry on a regular basis. The volunteers soon discovered that they man and his son were living their van, sleeping on a mattress. The man monitored the weather as he knew exactly what temperatures meant that they needed to find shelter or they could die from exposure. Part of their problem was caused by the son not receiving a disability benefit because the father was illiterate and couldn't fill out the paperwork."

Shafer also spoke of a seven-month journey to obtain housing for two clients, an

83 year old woman and her 78 year old husband. In August 2021 they were asked to vacate the home they were living as it had been sold. They did but could find no place else to go given the shortage of affordable housing in Allegan County.

They ended up living in their car and coming to the Christian Neighbors food pantry. Upon learning of their plight, Christian Neighbors helped them get lodging at the Comfort Inn for a week. The money ran out, but community members helped out and paid for some nights, but they still had to live in their car at times.

To make matters worse for those trying to find them housing, the court had them listed as having been evicted even though that wasn't the case.

Even worse, their car was rear-ended and totaled. They had only minimal PLPD insurance.

However, stimulus money then arrived and Christian Neighbors was able to find them an apartment in a low income senior unit. They had to agree to be a sponsor for a year to guarantee payment. But as Shafer said, "its' been 18 months and all good so far."

"This is humbling, especially for their generation" she explained. "They still

have no transportation and no family in the area, so we still pick up their meds or food for them if they need us to. We became family."

Conrad reports that her staff works with "very few clients who aren't trying to work if they're not already working."

Sometimes their financial circumstances cause them to lose their jobs. If their employer has to cut hours or expects them to work overtime, which they cannot do because of not having child care, they often lose their jobs.

The school calls a working mother to come get her child who's in trouble, but she tells them she can't because if goes, she'll lose her job. They insist, she goes, she loses her job.

Eding believes that lack of funding for assistance to ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) families, or as they used to be called "the working poor," as well as lack of day care for these single parents puts an unreasonable burden on them. "Day care is a big need right now. Parents get in trouble for leaving children alone but have no one to leave them with."

She reports that these individuals are usually involved with various agencies such as the Department of Protective Services or Department

of Health and Human Services with whom they have appointments. They cannot miss the appointment, but they have no child care. If they leave the children alone, at the least the parent can get into more trouble with these agencies and at worst tragedies can happen.

"This is where churches could step up and provide day care for these families," she said.

Getting a job takes money as applicants are expected to dress well and be presentable, not easy to do when living in a car or tent. Reliable transportation often causes job loss and can definitely hamper the search for a job. However, maintaining a car can be expensive, especially if the car owner works a low income job.

"The majority of people we work with are employed but usually in low paying, multiple part-time jobs with no benefits," Eding said. Conrad agrees, "we don't come across many folks who aren't trying to figure out how to pay their way."

"Being homeless is expensive," commented Shafer, and "most people don't realize that." For instance, people living in their cars during colder months go through a lot of gas to keep the car heated. "Homeless people usually have no cooking capability, so they

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have to eat processed foods or drive thru food, which are more expensive and unhealthy.”

“It’s a constant search for food for them,” she said.

On top of that, as Eding and Shafer have witnessed, there are many predators out there who take advantage of precariously housed people. Dishonest contractors and utility suppliers along with cash stores and rent-to-own companies make their money from these people who can least afford it. According to Eding, Michigan has no protections against predatory practices, and Shafer has spent many months trying to fight extortionate water rates for residents of two local mobile home parks

without success.

One local woman has been trying to help her 28-year old grandson find a home. Unable to live with his mother or father, he wound up living in his car with his girlfriend. It was a struggle to get him signed up for the disability benefits he qualified for since he has a hard time with paperwork, according to his grandmother.

“I’ve tried and tried and tried to find him a place to live but there’s nothing out there,” she said.

She believes that his mental health issues as well as not eating or sleeping properly given his situation led to his actions that resulted in a jail term.

As a last resort she had

purchased him a home in Allegan. However, when he is released from jail, the renters who are there now will have to go and may, in turn, end up homeless.

People are sometimes reluctant to seek help because of the stigma attached to homelessness.

All the agencies agree that the problem won’t be resolved by trying to blame anyone or second-guessing past choices. It’s about dealing with where these individuals and families are

now and helping them learn to make good decisions, something they may not have experienced if they come from families in generational poverty with longstanding chronic problems. This is why these agencies address mental health issues, provide counseling and education services and work to help their clients set realistic goals for a better future.

In the meantime, as Eding points out, “when basic needs are not met, you can’t move on to anything else.”

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