

# Homeless among county youth continues to grow (Part 4)

By Leslie Ballard

If children are the future, many in Allegan County are not off to the best starts.

Homelessness for youth looks a bit different than it does for adults although many young people become homeless when their parents do.

Some young people run away from domestic violence, abusive situations, or disagreements with their parents over boundary issues. Others are kicked out. A fire may have destroyed their home or their parents who live outside of Allegan County may have lost their home and the children come to Allegan County to live with relatives.

According to Toni Newell, Chief Operations Officer of The Ark Youth Shelter in Kalamazoo, recently their organization is also more frequently seeing young people who have gender identity questions, unsure of what they are feeling, and who are no longer welcome at home.

"In a materialistic world," she adds, "it's very difficult to be different when different may be perceived by some to mean there's something wrong with you."

"Some children are homeless and none of us know," said Gerry Mohr, Allegan Public School's Homeless Liaison. "Some families feel ashamed because of the stigma of homelessness. We found out about some children being homeless when their parents went to an agency to see if they could get a propane heater. That's a red flag, and when the agency looked into it, they found the family was living in a pop-up camper."

Most homeless young people couch surf, which means they may be living with a relative or friend on a temporary basis. Double housing is common among homeless youth, and while it is not an ideal situation, they at least have a roof over their heads.

"People want to blame those who are homeless for whatever reason - often through no fault of their own - but instead we need to address the problem," said Newell.

The McKinney-Vento

Act, which was authorized in 1987 and has been reauthorized several times since, is named after the two congressmen who wanted to ensure that homeless children are provided the same opportunity at public education as other children and youth.

Among other services, McKinney-Vento requires public school districts to provide a Homeless Liaison to help students get the education they need without having to provide the normal documentation when enrolling and remaining at their school of origin wherever that may be.

This means the district where the child lives has to work with the district where their school of origin is and provide transportation. Providing that transportation can be a challenge according to local Homeless Liaisons.

"Rural communities don't have easy access to public transportation, and we have significant distances between communities," observed Ben Bever, the Homeless Liaison for the Allegan Area Educational Service Agency.

Mohr, who has been a Homeless Liaison for the past 10 years, can cite many examples of transporting students from Lawton or Mattawan or Grand Rapids and other locations to the APS school of origin or vice versa. He works with other liaisons throughout the county and with other counties to arrange the logistics behind getting these children to their school.

Sometimes the person the child lives with can be responsible for transport, and the school or origin can help by providing gas cards.

"If they leave their home school [school of origin] in 11th or 12th grades, their likelihood of graduating from high school is very low according to all of the data," said Mohr.

"Their school of origin has their support group - teachers and friends," he noted. He deals with approximately 40 homeless youth a year.

"If they don't have a supportive family, it can be a problem for them to find a place to live. They call me



for leads on apartments, and I have none," Mohr stated.

Fennville Public Schools Homeless Liaison for 11 years, Jodi Scovill agrees. "It breaks my heart when those struggling to find housing ask me for assistance. There just isn't enough affordable housing available." Scovill works with @55 homeless youth annually.

A good Samaritan in Allegan has taken in three children so that they can have a home and complete school. According to Mohr, they are all doing all right.

For those youth who don't have the option of double housing or couch surfing, The Ark Shelter, which serves youth ages 10-

17 offers a "safe, temporary place for youth who have run away from home, are homeless, have been kicked out of their home or are experiencing a crisis situation in their lives."

"We are in a unique situation," said Newell, "because of our large geographic footprint - we work in 9 counties, including Allegan, Barry and those that border Kalamazoo. Last year they provided shelter and services to 80-100 youth.

Their first priority is to build trust with their clients who are concerned that something bad might happen if they seek help. So a safe place to talk is essential as is making sure the client is in good physical health. "We

need to treat the whole child before the housing situation is addressed," stated Newell. Then if they are willing to see a therapist, The Ark works with the youth and the family.

Newell recalls a situation where a youth was experiencing a gender identity crisis. During therapy it became clear that returning to home wasn't an option. A host family agreed to take them, and it turned out well. The youth graduated and is now planning for the future.

Being homeless means youth "can't participate in a lot of things like sports or other activities, and they have no place to bring friends to, which can also cause a social delay," stated Newell.

"Access to internet is also a problem - many of these young people are very bright, but if they don't have internet, they can fall behind in school while others think they are just not trying."

"What's happening with their families is dominating their lives," she added.

The Ark also provides drop-in services at Allegan County schools. This service was disrupted by Covid, but Newell expects

it to be fully operational for the coming school year.

At a drop-in event Ark Outreach Case Managers meet with students at middle and high schools throughout Allegan County. These events usually last between a half hour to an hour before, during or after school. These events are open to all students. A staple of these events are basic needs giveaways, whether that be food, hygiene products, or other basic items. Additionally, case managers provide youth with information regarding Ark Services and crisis counseling, dealing with whatever needs the young person may have.

As stated in an earlier article, homelessness among youth in rural areas is nearly the same as in urban areas. We may not see children living in boxes in the town and city alleyways, but children in our county are indeed homeless and at risk of futures that don't offer much hope.

"You don't think of Allegan County as a place where you have homelessness, or physical and sexual abuse, but our districts deal with it on a regular basis," Bever noted.

## MIOSHA levels maximum fine to diver's employer

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MIOSHA's General Industry Safety and Health Division completed its investigation into the July 7, 2021 death of a diver in Allegan County.

Brian Trahey died while inspecting the Calkins Bridge Dam.

MIOSHA says a team of five Great Lakes Engineering Group LLC employees were performing an underwater structural inspection of the downstream side of the hydro-electric dam.

During the inspection, the employees lost contact with Trahey, who was swept downstream.

Emergency crews recovered Trahey's body several hours later, about 150-200



**Brian Trahey** to Great Lakes Engineering Group LLC for nine violations. MIOSHA's investigation

yards from the dam. The investigation into Trahey's death ended with MIOSHA issuing citations

found that the employer's dive team had a history of scuba diving without line tending or continuous visual contact with the divers. MIOSHA says employees had been swept downstream before, and Great Lakes Engineering Group LLC did not have policies in place to prevent or respond to it happening.

MIOSHA issued the maximum penalty allowed for the nine violations, which totals \$119,000.

One violation is considered "willful-serious," which carries a maximum fine of \$70,000.

The other eight violations are considered "serious," which carries a maximum fine of \$7,000 each.