

Q&A: Emergency Shelter provides broad range of help

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Over the last week, we've run a number of columns that explore the issue of hunger and homelessness in the Fox Cities as part of National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week.

Thursday, on our Newsmakers interview show at www.postcrescent.com, we talked with Debra Cronmiller, the executive director of the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley, and Chris Lashock, one of the shelter's street outreach workers, about the work that the Emergency Shelter does in not only providing a temporary home but helping the homeless become self-sufficient and helping those at risk of become homeless stay in stable housing.

Here's an edited transcript of the interview:

Do you have an idea of how many people are homeless in the Fox Cities at any given time?

Cronmiller: Actually, we do. A number of years ago, the federal government asked the states to report accurate counts of homeless individuals. In order to do that, we can't just all report how many people we serve in a year because I might serve some individuals who are also served in other location or other facilities.

So we adopted a strategy where, on one day, twice a year, we all together count who's in our community at that time and then we report that data. It's that combination of data from all sorts of different places, unduplicated, that gives us an accurate count.

In our community, we had 333 individuals on July 28 of this year. On Jan. 28, we will count again.

Where do you look?

Lashock, For the "point in time" count, anyone who's in a shelter, whether it's our shelter, the Warming Shelter or Harbor House are included, as well as individuals in transitional housing – COTS, the Salvation Army, Housing Partnership. But one of the most difficult components of that day is the actual street count, finding people

who are living in places not meant for human habitation.

During the July count, we had volunteers for the community, as well as agency staff from different agencies within the housing collation, lead groups and go out into parks, underneath bridges and in some situations, into abandoned houses.

We found 55 individuals that night that did not have shelter. That was an incredible increase from numbers we've seen in the past in people sleeping outside.

Over the past year, there's been much more evidence of people sleeping under bridges and in alleys. We often get reports from community members who call the shelter to inform us that they saw someone sleeping in an alley or they noticed a mattress that was moved to a certain location.

In addition to responding to calls, are also making rounds?

Lashock: Absolutely. What we often find is that it's easier to scout out, for the lack of a better term, certain areas – parks or bridges – during the day. We try to make it to those locations at least once a week.

Just based on very subtle things, you can sort of tell if someone's been in that area. If we see that evidence, well try to go back later in the evening or first thing in the morning. Other times, well simply leave our cards in certain locations. Our cards tend to make their rounds as well.

For the folks who are at the shelter, for the most part, do they show up at your door or are they referred?

Cronmiller: A combination of those. Some people self-identify as needing a homeless provider. They've lost their housing and they really feel that's the only option left to them, and we can provide them with a safe shelter.

Often, though, people don't come to the conclusion on their own that they need an emergency shelter. Rather, they'll go to their pastor or they'll go to a county agency or another agency, whether that's LEAVEN or the Salvation Army. Through the discussion with the workers in those environments, they might be pointed to our direction.

How many people can you house in the shelter?

Cronmiller: On any given day, we have a capacity of 75. Most days, were right at our capacity or close to it. This year, we've unfortunately had many nights we've had to turn away because were over our capacity.

If you've full, where do they go, the Warming Shelter now that it's open for the season?

Cronmiller: That's the first choice. Historically, we've also worked with the other shelter providers, whether that's in Green Bay or Oshkosh. Often, if we start probing with some very difficult questions and let them know "we're at capacity so let's problem solve this. Is there a friend, a family member, someone for a night or two, until time when a bed would open up here, you could stay with?" That sometimes helps.

Once you accept them into the shelter, what happens?

Cronmiller: We have a full range of services that we provide for our shelter residents. First and foremost, we're meeting their need for safe housing. Everybody gets their basic needs for food, personal care items, the children get diapers.

Once individuals are settled into the shelter, we have them meet with our case management team. And then we really being to work of identifying what goals, what priorities we should be working on to help them.

Individuals set and achieve goals. If they continue that process, they will ultimately leave the Emergency Shelter and be more self-sufficient, with stable housing that they can support.

We don't have a time-limited length of stay but rather work on an approach that is, as long as you're making process toward your goal, we'll extend your stay in shelter. And what we know is that, as long as they're making progress toward their own goals, they will leave successfully.

As many people as your serving who are homeless, you're serving more through your prevention program. Can you tell us about that?

Cronmiller: Prevention is one of the things that helps us build capacity at the Emergency Shelter because, if we didn't have prevention

services, we'd have even more turn-aways than we have right now.

Last year in our shelter program, we served about 800 individuals, and we're on track this year to serve slightly over 800 individuals.

Our prevention program last year served 1,399 individuals. What the real success of this is that 1,388 of the individuals maintained their housing. They never needed as emergency shelter. What we all want for our community is that people don't have to experience homelessness.