

Debra Cronmiller column: Homeless get connected through Shelter

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As the executive director of the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley for the last 12 years, I've invested a great deal of time trying to build awareness in this community of the homeless problem we're all facing.

The silhouettes lining College Avenue this week are another effort to help residents in our community become cognizant of this problem that all too often remains hidden from most of us.

In recent years, with the near-doubling of the number of families and individuals living in poverty in our area, efforts to build awareness are all the more necessary. More important than building awareness, however, is the work being done to address homelessness by the Emergency Shelter, and our partners in the Housing Coalition.

Today, in addition to providing homeless families and individuals basic food and shelter, the Emergency Shelter also provides services and case management, prevention programming, street outreach and the Housing First program. In combination, these programs significantly affect not only the lives of those experiencing homelessness but our community as a whole.

The services provided at the Emergency Shelter to families and individuals experiencing homelessness are comprehensive. Case management begins with a holistic assessment to identify what's working, what connections to services may already exist and what's needed to assist homeless individuals to resolve their crisis.

We have surrounded ourselves with numerous partners to enhance the effectiveness of our services. We have an economic support worker from Outagamie County Health and Human Service on-site to assist people in accessing the benefits they need. We have a clinic at the shelter that's staffed by the professionals at the Fox Cities Community Health Center to create immediate access to health and mental health services to those we serve.

FISC, the Apartment Association, Fair Housing, UW-Oshkosh nursing students and many other local service providers make presentations regularly in our daily skills training class so the individuals we serve can better use the providers in our community and learn the basic skills they'll need to work and live self-sufficiently.

Prevention services have been offered for nearly 10 years. The prevention program of the Emergency Shelter was formally merged with LEAVEN's prevention program for high-risk clients three years ago. This collaborative program last year served 1,399 individuals at imminent risk of housing loss. Only 11 of these clients lost their housing and entered shelter – all the rest remained in their community housing.

The collaborative nature of our program allows us to provide some follow-up services and, each year, we're demonstrating that families and individuals who had needed emergency financial assistance repeatedly to remain stable are now able to be self-sufficient – freeing these limited resources for families new to crisis.

The outreach program of the Emergency Shelter is a relatively new program but critically important in serving the most underserved of those without housing – street homeless people. Our outreach workers literally go into the community – the transit center, library, parks, parking lots, bridges and abandoned vehicles and buildings – to find homeless individuals who aren't being served.

Over time, a relationship will be established and services can be provided, especially the needed mental health services that most street homeless people aren't receiving.

By assisting these individuals to connect to services and to benefits such as Social Security, a foundation of wellness (physical, mental and financial) can be created so they have housing options that are safe and adequate.

And finally, our Housing First program serves chronically homeless persons by first providing permanent housing and then, from that stable base, provides services that build the capacity of the individual to be self-sufficient. Our data shows that, after one year of participation in the program, 85 percent of our clients – those who had long histories of chronic homelessness – remain in stable housing and contribute toward their own rent.

The Emergency Shelter is very proud of the services we provide but we recognize that, without our many partners and collaborators, we would have but a fraction of the success we have in assisting families and individuals to leave the crisis of homelessness.

Without the financial investment of this community, our programs, which cost nearly \$2 million per year to operate, could not positively affect the 2,500 individuals a year we touch.

This week, you'll read more about the community's systems of services and the many continuums of care that are established to create greater collegiality among the services providers, reduce duplication of services and enhance outcomes for all people in need.

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