

BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

Long road between survival and stability for Bucks County's homeless

By Marion Callahan

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The homeless in Bucks County are barely visible to most, tucked in wooded lots behind shopping centers and housing developments, sheltered in cars or huddled under canopies of restaurants and businesses throughout the region. The total number of homeless is tough to measure, but area housing and human service officials say crisis calls for help are on the rise. Affordable housing, emergency shelters and funds to help are in short supply.

The building under construction is hard to miss from Wawa in Upper Moreland, where Richard Valier stood smoking a Marlboro and gesturing toward the 250 condominiums slated to rise near the intersection of York and Easton roads.

"There are plenty of homes out there, but I can't afford any and I've stopped looking," said Valier, flicking his butt in the trash. "Life isn't fair; never has been."

At 70 years old, Valier isn't looking for fairness. His needs are much more imminent.

That day, he was looking for water at Burger King, so he could take his Ginseng and vitamins. Then, he was looking for a place to shave, and was headed to a bathroom at Walmart to do just that. Most necessities were packed in a trash bag, tucked in the woods not far from a commercial highway in Warminster. On top of the bag is a blow dryer, which he plugs into an outside outlet to keep warm on cold nights.

He's always looking for money, and he'll ask for it throughout the day, which is planned according to where he can sleep, sip free coffee, and rest his head before he's nudged to move along to the next stop.

Homelessness, advocates say, is a complex issue to address — and even more so in suburban counties like Bucks, advocates say.

“Homelessness in Bucks County is not always as visible as the homelessness that you will see in larger cities like Philadelphia or New York City,” said Jeffrey Fields, director of housing services in Bucks County. “A large amount of homeless persons are living in their cars, in the woods, in abandoned buildings, or staying in motels paid for by charitable organizations.”

The total number of homeless is tough to measure, but area housing and human service officials get a snapshot of the crisis through an annual point-in-time count, conducted once a year on a winter night. In Bucks County, volunteers located 359 homeless people the night of Jan. 29. Some were living in emergency shelters, transitional housing or outdoors. Though the figure marks a 9.6-percent dip from 2018, crisis calls for help soared by 19 percent in the past year.

Partnering with non-profits and other agencies, Bucks County is working to get people off the streets and into homes more quickly through rapid rehousing and other community outreach services. Fields said the county has increased its focus on Housing First, which aims to get a household quickly into safe, affordable housing, and then, once they are housed, to work on other needs such as employment, transportation, and medical or mental health.

Yet the county still needs more funding sources that are “flexible in nature to help remedy unique issues that can potentially cause or increase duration of homelessness,” Fields said. In the last two years, the county also has bolstered the number of people doing street outreach and hired more people to connect with landlords and properties to track down affordable housing options.

“One of our greatest challenges is the lack of affordable housing and the low vacancy rate in Bucks County,” said Erin Lukoss, executive director of the Bucks County Opportunity Council, a nonprofit that provides a variety of housing emergency and human services. “It's less than 2 percent, so even when support is

available, it's difficult finding a place that is willing to rent." The council is always looking for landlords and property owners in the community to step in and give needy families a chance.

"Many people don't want to go into a shelter or feel they can't," said Lukoss, adding that some have a pet they don't want to leave or a job they don't want to lose. "There are resources available but they are not always what the individual wants." In those cases, the council's outreach team provides food, supplies and repeated offers to help.

From Anne Bishop's perspective, lack of affordable housing is just part of the problem. "You can't narrow it down to one thing," said Bishop, who is on the board of Buck County's Coalition to Shelter and Support the Homeless, also known as CSSH.

"We have a lot of people who are working; they have jobs," she said. "Even with jobs, some live from tents. They are in the woods or under the bridge abutments, under the alcove of a building or in the doorway to protect themselves from rain."

Along with the burden of finding shelter, many lack education, paperwork or a driver's license needed to secure a job. Deborah Neidhardt, CSSH board president, said housing challenges can be triggered by a break up, job loss, car trouble and dozens of other reasons. There also are those who are too proud to take help.

One woman who comes to the shelter in the winter has been homeless for three years and remains reluctant to accept services. "She's a proud woman and it's difficult," said Neidhardt, who said the woman lost her home after her husband, the primary income provider, died. "She's on my mind; she's determined to find her way on her own. We can only support her and make suggestions, hoping she'll one day take help."

Lack of emergency housing

One 58-year-old did accept help from the shelter volunteers, who did the leg work to get him personal documents he needed for a job. He became homeless a year ago after a DUI charge. He lost his car, then his job and was unable to pay

rent. He said homelessness is a “vicious cycle” that he never expected to experience.

“People don’t realize that one mistake like a DUI destroys your entire life,” he said. Occasionally, his employer will let him sleep in a work shed. He said he’s just happy he has a job, “even if it means starting over again, cleaning and setting up rooms” for a catering business.

Shouldering a job and homelessness is exhausting. It’s the lack of regular sleep that leaves him feeling most deprived. He’s on a waiting list for housing, but wishes that some of the county’s abandoned buildings could be opened for people needing shelter — during all seasons. “We are homeless in the summer, too ... all around there are people living in tents and have nowhere to go.”

But emergency housing is in short supply in many pockets of the county. In Bucks County, there are four emergency homeless shelters, including a 75-bed facility in Lower Bucks that serves individuals and families with children who are homeless; Valley Youth House Shelter, which serves runaway and homeless youth; and A Woman’s Place Domestic Violence Shelter in Central Bucks, which offers shelter for individuals and families fleeing domestic violence. Family Promise of Lower Bucks recently announced plans to operate a 24-hour shelter service in Middletown for homeless parents with children and pregnant moms.

Lukoss said that emergency shelter assistance is usually accessible in lower Bucks County, but there are few options in Central and Upper Bucks, except for Code Blue shelters that open in extreme cold conditions. An Upper Bucks group is considering opening an emergency shelter year round, but as of now, people in need of shelter are advised to go to the lower end of the county. Many are not able to make the trek or don’t want to leave their home area.

While emergency shelters would help, Lukoss said outreach workers are usually successful in linking individuals living on the streets who want help to shelters and temporary housing through a “rapid rehousing” program. Both the Opportunity Council and the county also have “housing locators” to identify housing for families and link them with a place to stay and services they need to return to “stable housing.” The county offers options for those who can transition to work and those who can’t because of a setback or disability. Among

the county's housing options are permanent support housing, geared for those with a serious mental illness, and temporary housing for those with a substance abuse disorder and mental illness.

But the road from homelessness to stability has its barriers.

Challenges to housing include the lack of a person's documentation needed to apply for and rent an apartment and locating affordable rental units and landlords willing to rent to people that may have poor credit history, evictions, or lack of income, Fields said. Another is the individual's ability to pay the rent and living expenses once financial assistance ends.

Demographic and social issues also come in to play, as lack of transportation or renting in certain areas is limited, Fields said. Outreach workers also see that homeless individuals need help that goes far beyond rental assistance.

"The key to maintain housing is income and even though people do not need income for our types our programs to get into housing, we need to work on helping them keep that home," Lukoss said. "For people who can work, if they lack a employment history or have a criminal background or lack skills, it's difficult to find employment at a wage to sustain housing."

Lack of transportation also is a barrier.

"In Bucks you need a vehicle or someone who has one to get to and from work," Lukoss said. "In Lower Bucks, there are buses, but in Central and Upper Bucks, it's not always option, so they have to find employment they can get to by walking or biking."

That's where other community resources come in, she said.

Bucks County Opportunity Council, the county and other nonprofits are working with CareerLink in Bucks County to connect people with education, training and available jobs. The council's self-sufficiency program is also available to house and support low-income Bucks residents temporarily. "We do our best to help; we don't want to see people cycle through the system, but it does happen," said Lukoss.

Work not always an option

Valier, who has been homeless for more than five years, said working isn't an option for him.

"I'm 70 years and a half old, and I'm too tired and too exhausted to find work," Valier said.

The Social Security check he gets each month, which is less than \$1,000, isn't enough to house and feed him. It covers a few days at a local motel, a Walmart phone plan and enough meals to survive until the next monthly check. When the temperatures dip below freezing and the sun sets, Valier and many others count on church doors across Bucks County opening for Code Blue shelters. One snowy February day, Doylestown Presbyterian opened at 7 p.m. and weather-weary neighbors, many layered in multiple shirts and cheeks flushed from the chill, slowly filed in.

Some gathered around tables set up in the gym, while others headed straight to a kitchen, where volunteers dished out steamy plates of roasted chicken, vegetables and potatoes. One man's hands were still too numb to clutch a plate, so he waited in the main gym, offering a soft smile to the volunteers lining the walls with air mattresses and covering them with sheets and blankets. Valier was there and thanked the workers, praising them for being "a lifesaver."

The homeless that gathered on Code Blue that night described the heaviest burden — the weight of uncertainty everywhere they go, not knowing where to sit and sip coffee and where to sleeping without thieves at their backs. One man would hop on a train nearly every day, seeking refuge from the cold.

Valier said he used to sleep in the back alcove at Walmart. There for three months, "they came over and said, 'You can't sleep here anymore.' I said, 'You understand it's 16 degrees out?' They said, 'Yeah, but you can't sleep here anymore.'" If a friend didn't come help him that morning, "I would have died of hypothermia."

Public perception is another obstacle the homeless say they face.

"I want people to know we are not dirty," said 19-year-old Ashley, sitting at a Doylestown Code Blue shelter with her fiance.

There, volunteers provided not just a place to sleep and a warm meal, but they also helped her and her fiance, Kayla, get a copy of documents needed for employment.

“I got my real physical birth certificate,” said Ashley, who said she lost all of her personal belongings when living on the streets.

For five months, the couple lived out of a tent in Warminster. They now are in an emergency shelter in Lower Bucks and are on the waiting list for an apartment through the rapid-rehousing program.

“I have a job now and things are looking up,” said Kayla, who is employed at a fast-food restaurant and will be able to pitch in for 30 percent of the rent. “I still think about the people at the Doylestown Code Blue who were there when we needed them.”

Jim Raynock, a guest at Cavalry Baptist Church in Bristol one winter night, was in the process of what he called “de-bugging,” which he explained meant living out of his car to save on expenses like rent, traveling, while working temporary jobs between Florida in the winter and the Pennsylvania and New Jersey area in the summer.

He said he was making a living as a driver for Uber and Lyft when his car got rear-ended in a parking lot. Then, there were medical issues.

He was recently admitted to Jefferson Hospital Torresdale, where he learned he had heart disease and diabetes. With the cost of the visit and medication, he said he doesn't have the money to fix his car, taking away his income source. “I'm trying to garner the resources to get my car fixed and get back to work,” said Raynock, adding that his expenses would be just gas, a gym membership for shower facilities and occasional Knights Inn stays to watch Eagles games.

The challenges he faces exemplify what many homeless are up against — lack of documentation, adequate income for housing, family resources and stability, advocates said.

“They can't solve the problem; no one seems to have anything to offer. There's more compassion for the illegals than for the homeless,” Valier said. “America's consciousness about homelessness needs to be raised considerably.”

Yet he is quick to rattle off instances of people who stepped in when he needed help.

“Some people are angelic,” he said.

Like the time a man who saw him at a bus stop near Burger King and gave him \$40 cash, or the instance a few years ago when a woman who saw him stranded outside a Walmart on Christmas Eve and insisted and him a ride to a hotel where she put him up for two nights. Just the other day, a lady stopped him from sifting through cigarette butts in front of a Hatboro in Wawa and bought him his own pack.

“But those things don’t happen very often,” he said.

Valier said he tries to repay the favors and logs what he borrows next to a list of names on his Samsung phone. “As soon as I get my Social Security check, I’ll pay them back.”

Thomas Friestad contributed to this report.

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