

# Local View: Lincoln Battling Homeless Crisis

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I appreciated seeing the recent photo slideshow "[From drugs to soaring rents, many paths lead to homelessness.](#)" It was especially significant in that it was published during National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week.

The photographer went along the West Coast, where there is undoubtedly a crisis with homelessness, and interviewed individuals to get a glimpse of how they got there. The stories are certainly sad, but many were very similar to what we hear from homeless individuals in our own community -- lost jobs, broken families, mental illness, addiction, poverty.

While we may not think we are in crisis here in Lincoln because our homeless statistics don't compare to large urban centers or warmer climate areas, even one person homeless is a crisis. Although I know we can't help everyone, we must continue to try.

According to Lincoln Vital Signs 2017 report, 15 percent of Lincoln households are living below the federal poverty level, and the number of students receiving free lunch has doubled since 2005. This is significant in a community as prosperous as ours.

Furthermore, data compiled by the Center for Children, Families and the Law -- the most accurate data source on homeless services, on behalf of the Lincoln Homeless Coalition -- reports, in the year ending October 2016, 82 percent of those who were assisted with permanent housing have not suffered a subsequent homeless episode. Our community is making progress, but there is still work to be done.

A year ago, Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach launched a bold new vision to defeat hunger and homelessness. In advancing that vision, we developed two new programs, a Housing First program to house the chronically homeless with low barriers to housing and the Landlord Liaison Project to work with landlords and identify affordable housing for this hard to serve population.

I'm thankful to report that, a year later, we have provided for or assisted in finding housing for 62 formerly homeless individuals and families and provided more than 100,000 meals annually. Through hunger relief, we not only provide food but strive to educate and encourage on the importance of good nutrition.

And while there is a very strong network of organizations, businesses, faith communities and concerned citizens dedicated to ending hunger and homelessness in Lincoln, we can't do it alone. Solving this crisis will require city leadership and policymakers to acknowledge that expanding affordable housing options and housing support services should be given a higher priority.

Because homelessness is also a medical issue, the health care community must join this effort as well. Studies show that people experiencing homelessness are hospitalized at rates four times

that of the general population and that stable housing improves the health of the chronically homeless. Housing and providing a medical home is not only the right thing to do but it is also cost-effective.

On one day in January, the annual Point in Time Count in Lincoln reported 606 homeless persons and an additional 382 that were housed in permanent supportive or rapid rehousing programs. In the Annual Homeless Assessment Reporting Year ending last September, Lincoln reported 2,811 people in shelter, transitional housing or permanent supportive housing programs. This number does not include the unsheltered or those in domestic violence shelters.

The same annual count identified 49 unsheltered homeless individuals. This does not include those “couch surfing” or doubled up. If anything, we underreport the need.

Strides have been made over recent years, and the overall number of homeless persons is slowly declining. Advancements in data collection and programs are comprehensive, innovative, individualized to the person and more effective at preventing homelessness. With a sense of urgency, we must continue to educate and advocate for those who are hungry and with no place to call home.

Hunger and homelessness don't discriminate. It can happen to anyone. All those experiencing it have their stories and all our related to us by our common humanity.

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