

Homelessness persists

Community help needed to solve issues, protect subsidies

OTHER VOICES

By JULIE STEINER

By now, we all know that there are homeless people in our community.

But many are surprised to learn how pervasive the problem is in Washtenaw County. On an evening in March 2004 all the agencies who work with homeless people did a Point in Time survey. The results of this survey may surprise you. Did you know that:

- 2,756 people will experience homelessness within a year in Washtenaw County;

- 664 people had nowhere to live on the night of March 18, 2004;

- 26 percent of those people were families;

- 137 were children;

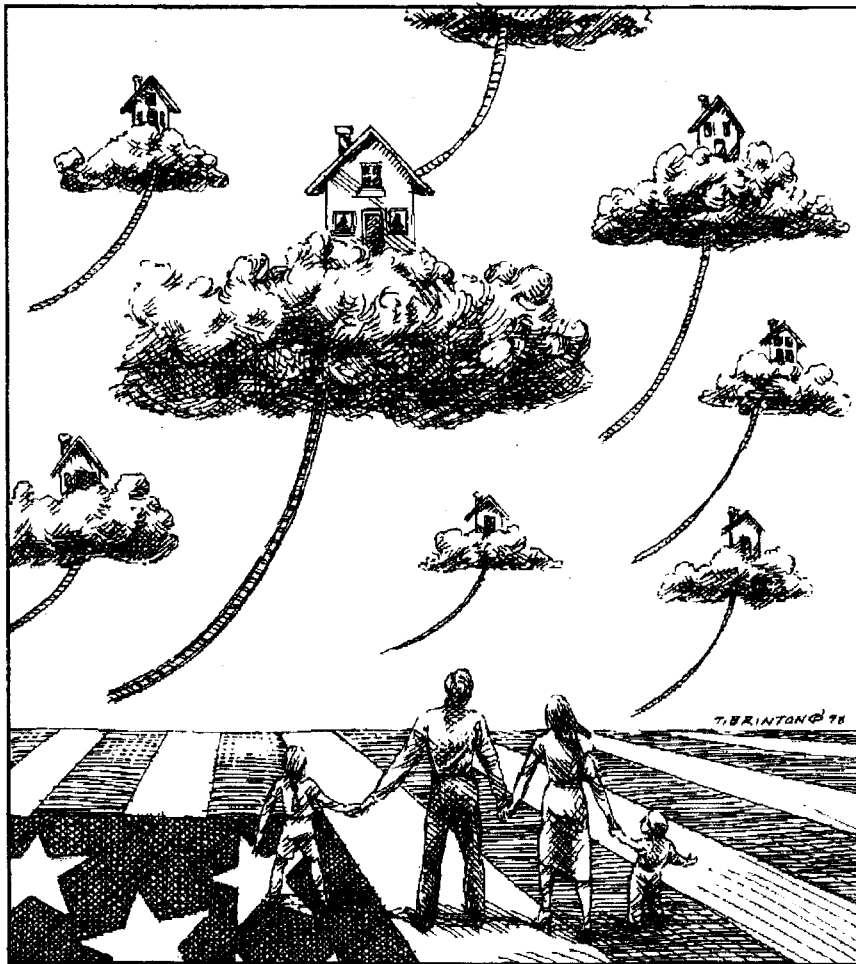
- 34 percent of the people who are homeless are employed;

- On 153 days last year, people sought detox services in our community and were turned away for lack of space.

And these numbers do not even include those families who are moving from friends house to friends house while they wait for access to emergency shelters. These are some pretty shocking numbers.

"The problem of homelessness was virtually nonexistent 20 years ago. It is largely a creature of entry-level wages that have not kept pace with rapidly increasing housing costs. Rising costs of childcare and health care, federal disinvestments in public housing, and domestic violence have contributed significantly as well. The result is that for the first time in our nation's history, large numbers of hard working families are one layoff, apartment fire, or health crisis away from homelessness." (One Family, Inc.)

The long-term solution to our epidemic of family homelessness lies in policies that create affordable housing



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and promote economic independence. The most successful program overall is subsidized housing.

- We know that the average cost of preventing homelessness is one-sixth the cost of housing a family in emergency shelter.

- We know that nationally, it costs \$47,608 to keep homeless children in foster care but the average cost of housing and support services to the same family is \$9,000.

- A recent New York City study

showed that 80 percent of formerly homeless families who received housing assistance stayed housed. In contrast, only 18 percent of families who did not receive assistance were still housed a year later.

Washtenaw County has launched a Blueprint to End Homelessness with plans to significantly alter the landscape of affordable housing and services to low income people. But the county cannot do it alone.

Individuals like you can help by vol-

unteering with local service providers and by contacting our government officials to ensure that they hear that we are all concerned about everyone in our community.

Let them know that:

- We must target rental housing that is affordable to families making less than \$25,000 annually;

- Government should support policies and programs that create incentives for new rental housing giving lowest income families priority;

- Focus on prevention with flexible resources to resolve economic crises before a family becomes homeless;

- Preserve the Section 8 program, which is the most significant public-private housing partnership and the single major housing subsidy for low-income Americans.

Right now, the proposed federal budget for 2005 would put deep cuts into Section 8. If the budget goes through, 250,000 families will lose their Section 8 vouchers. In Washtenaw County alone, people wait for up to two years on a list to receive a voucher.

If we all work together, the power of those who have already opened their hearts to people in need in Washtenaw County will be a tremendous power for change. There is much to be done. If you are interested in helping, please contact one of the service providers and let us know what you are willing to do: write letters, make phone calls, send e-mails, talk to neighbors and friends, mentor a family, serve a meal. Whatever you can offer, we can put to great use. And working together will make it possible to make a home for all in Washtenaw County.

Julie A. Steiner is Ann Arbor executive director of Interfaith Hospitality Network @ Alpha House. News readers can contribute essays of general interest to Other Voices. Please call the editorial page editor at (734) 994-6764.