

# **Homelessness: What Works?**

Quest Club - Fort Wayne, Indiana

*Presented March 15, 2024*

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I will start today with a quote I found on the topic of Homelessness in Allen County.

“The Problems (of homelessness) are centered in poverty and the lack of housing, both of which are symptoms of (~~such as~~) mental illness, mental retardation, chronic illness, drug and alcohol addiction, the experience of catastrophic loss, depression, borderline personality disorders, low endurance and low self-esteem, and underneath it all, an inability to relate to other people, often their own families who may love them but can’t stand to live with them.” End quote.

This was the opening statement from the 2006 Quest paper of the late Reverend Dr. Richard Frazier of Trinity English Lutheran Church. 24 of the 26 homeless agencies he cited in that Quest paper still exist today - 18 years later. *Any dramatic changes in your perception of Homelessness during that time period?*

*Please forgive me for any of my descriptive terms used in this crisis. Just as “mental retardation” was used 18 years ago, some of my descriptions may be awkward, cruel, and perhaps dated. Just as the term “the homeless” is now more compassionately labeled as “the unhoused”. I have been fortunate in my life to witness and assist a wide variety of unhoused individuals and families. I mean that – I have been fortunate. The following are four examples that I have experienced and may give you a vignette of the unhoused.*

1. In 1980, my church congregation in Atlanta sponsored a Laotian Hmong family.

The Hmong had remained in Southeast Asia after helping the American effort in the Viet Nam war and were being persecuted. The sponsored family consisted of father, mother, a four-year-old, a two-year old and... “surprise” mom was pregnant. They exited the airplane with a few boxes - their complete worldly possessions. I was one of six volunteers who led and

accompanied this family through their first year in a vastly different society. The father was an intelligent hardworking man with an amazing desire for a new start. They were without a personal network of family and friends except for us. He found hourly work. They adapted well but within a year, voluntarily re-located to Minneapolis, Minnesota to join the largest Hmong community in the United States. Quick note - While many of the challenges for these Hmong immigrants are the same for the homeless, I will not be discussing immigrant settlement today.

2. I am an American Red Cross disaster volunteer. I have volunteered in ten national disasters. Within hours after a disaster or sometimes before, the Red Cross opens shelters. They welcome all individuals and families as they pour into those gymnasiums, public event centers and arenas with a few garbage bags, boxes or a random suitcase with no questions asked. They are hungry, sometime wet and cold having lost all of their possessions and any semblance of a home or sometimes a whole community. Some are financially secure and pull-out a credit card and relocate to hotels or another city within a few days. Some call friends and go to the other family member's homes. Others have just been pushed over the financial edge. There are the hourly workers who won't get a paycheck while their places of employment are closed and being rebuilt or come to the realization of that job disappearing. Most of the last residents housed in our Red Cross shelters are "Pre-disaster homeless". Most shelter clients crave independence and wish a quick recovery from a disaster. The American Red Cross strives for "resilience" from our clients and gives them the tools. Most want to be independent...BUT some do not.

3. I was a volunteer and Board member about 20 years ago with Interfaith Hospitality Network in Fort Wayne. Founded in 1999, it was the only local shelter providing emergency housing for

homeless families. Homeless families were housed at twelve area churches for an evening meal and overnight accommodations on one-week cycles. Most families stayed to themselves and frequently felt ill from the stress. I slept on the couch during their stays to be an overnight host. A van gathered them in the morning and took them to a day center where children were picked up for school and adults were given job help and a permanent address for potential employers. The original two-week anticipated home finding process was realistically lengthened to two months. In 2009, the program transformed to “Just Neighbors - Interfaith Homeless Network.” The State Street Family Center now houses all families for their entire stay in a “permanent” family bedroom while churches still bring dinners into the residents. At the beginning of this month, they had 10 families with 13 adults which includes three infants, fourteen children ages 2 – 12 and two teenagers for a total of 32 individuals. More on “Just Neighbors” later.

4. Prior to the pandemic, my wife and I volunteered at the Rescue Mission on Superior Street. We served dinner to the program residents on a monthly basis. We first served the men within the Rehabilitation programs named Restoration House. Those men were respectful both in appearance and manners with a consistent please and thank you. When those men finished their meal and the room was cleared, the doors are opened to “those off the street”. Some were dressed like me...some were very different. Those individuals (mostly men, a few women and children) were very hungry, layered in clothing, protective of their personal belongings and space, non-talkative with no or little social interaction. They were unkept.

### **The Current State of Homelessness and Causes**

Federal officials reported on December 15, 2023 that the United States had experienced a dramatic 12% increase in homelessness to its highest reported level as soaring rents and a decline in coronavirus pandemic assistance combined to put housing out of reach for many. About 635,000 people were reported homeless nationwide, the most since yearly counts began in 2007. More than half the people experiencing homelessness in our country were in California with 28%, New York, Florida and Washington state. Indiana ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> of the states with unhoused people as a state, 8 of every 10,000 people homeless for a total of 5,449 people. Marion County by itself doubles that rate. First time homelessness was behind most of that recent national increase which makes strategies that help people exit or prevent homelessness in the first place much more critical.

*Let me communicate one KEY reality. No one desires to be homeless. But there are some life elements that are more common to homelessness.* Homelessness is caused by trauma, mental illness, substance abuse, destructive behaviors, no access to education or resources and lack of people who care. A study by “The California Policy Lab” found 75% of **unsheltered** homeless have substance abuse conditions, 78% have mental health conditions and 84% have physical health conditions.

**Mental Illness** - A national mental illness crisis has been building since the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in the 1960s. The Medicaid Act of 1965 envisioned the transition of those needing help to new “Wonder” drugs to treat mental illness or better treatment in small community centers than in specialized state hospitals. The money was cut to the state facilities while funding for assumed less costly community services started. *(Our country now has only*

*5% of the psychiatric beds than we had at time. They were simply eliminated)* The realization

that caring for serious mental cases without adequate professional staff on hand and without the means to monitor drug treatments is seldom successful. An oft quoted saying is “Does mental illness cause homelessness or does homelessness cause mental illness”

**ALICE Families** (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) You could define them as “The Working Poor”. Sad to say, many within our community are one step away from homelessness.

Nationally nearly one in four households earn an annual income above the Federal Poverty Level but below well the cost of living. Health and Human Services (HHS) defines \$31,200 as

the federal poverty level guideline for a family of four. *A stark example:* ALICE families in

Indiana spend 19% of the family budget for childcare. That averages about \$500 per month for two children with a registered home-based childcare budget averaging \$832 month. See the

problem! To put this “working poor crisis in perspective, the city of Leo-Cedarville has 13.1%

ALICE families, Fort Wayne at 28.2% ALICE and the county high in Monroeville with 45.4% ALICE families. Zip code data is also available for Allen County.

**Lack of Affordable Housing** – It does not exist to a great extent. The Allen County rental occupancy rate is reportedly at 96% now. Communities and neighborhoods don’t embrace these developments. Landlords do NOT accept or welcome housing vouchers; Previously called Section 8 and now called the Housing Choice Voucher Program by HUD. Residents need help navigating the system. A person holding a Housing Voucher can have up to a five-year wait. In our city the Fort Wayne Housing Authority administers these with the prioritization of those families that make less than 30% of the area median income. Rental units are available for

those families that pay at least 30% of their adjusted gross income for rent and utilities with the Housing Authority paying the landlord the remainder. The most recent Allen County report boasts 1,100 family members assisted in public housing, 7,300 family members served in the Housing Choice voucher program. They opened the River's Edge Complex on Spy Run Avenue Extended in 2020 with 56 one-and-two-bedroom units for people with disabilities who are homeless with supportive services from Park Center Mental Health Center.

**Lack of Food versus Food Access** – Food is expensive but I had one Fort Wayne social service leader tell me that homelessness has nothing to do with food scarcity but with food availability to the right people. Nineteen Fort Wayne non-profit organizations offer 37 differently timed meals per week. The Rescue Mission serves three meals a day; St. Mary's Soup Kitchen serves one meal a day with both open every day of the year to anyone that desire. On Thursday night you can find three different dinner locations if desired.

*I have touched on some causes of homelessness, now I would like to share some Allen County programs working to alleviate the true scourge of being unhoused. These offerings range from the soft outreach to intense residential behavioral modification programs.*

### **What Works?**

**Fort Wayne Police Department's Hope and Recovery Team (HART);** They are the organizers and assist with "Handing Out Hope" in the Great Hall of the downtown Allen County Public Library from 11 AM to 1 PM on the third Wednesday of each month. Simply put it is a Social Service organization fair for the unhoused. Captain Kevin Hunter with the Fort Wayne Police Department states, "We hope to create relationships with individuals and that's the biggest thing. We don't push. we want to talk and be their neighbor and see if we can help

along the way. It's about building community with that population. It's about having a connection with them." The Police Department focuses on finding the road to recovery with addiction from opioids and stimulants. Avenues Recovery Center Inpatient Treatment participates in this fair along with Neighborhood Health, the YWCA and 15 other organizations.

**Community Circle of Caring** – Offered by Trinity English Lutheran Church Senior Pastor Gary Erdos writes “on Thursday evenings at 5:30 PM, we have dinner with our neighbors. (Anyone who would like to come and eat with us.) As you can imagine this shapes our attitudes in regard to any societal challenges including homelessness and the lack of adequate housing for many of our neighbors and friends. Pastor Erdos quotes Anglican Priest and ethicist Sam Wells who suggests “effective societal transformation will occur when we choose the hard work of being with one another honestly and openly, forming relationships that change us all.” They distribute free boxed lunches on Wednesday from their vestibule / parking lot in their Street Reach Program. The church publishes a list of nineteen partners that help feed those in need.

**Street Reach for the Homeless – Founder Sally Segerson**; I can best describe her as a Social Justice Advocate for the Homeless; She distributes food, personal hygiene items, gloves, hats, coats, blankets, and tents directly to the “street people” of Fort Wayne; Her Facebook page proclaims 349 coats distributed in 18 weeks and 316 tents distributed in 22 weeks. Her Journal Gazette opinion columns are fiery and don't mince words. She demands 24-hour cooling centers for all individuals and notification to the homeless of deteriorating summer air quality issues. She is Facebook based and inquires of the Mayor's office on a plan for additional warming centers for those banned from the Rescue Mission.



*“I am awaiting a response and know that staying silent when I have the ability to speak up is then joining that which is wrong. That making a difference means challenge, sometimes sacrifice but silence is complacency. I will not stay silent so others may remain comfortable and the “status quo” rules. Not yesterday, not today and looking forward, not tomorrow.*

*How do you feel about this outreach efforts? Does it stir you to action? Solution or simply empowerment?*

**YWCA of Northeast Indiana** has been in the forefront of advocating against domestic violence against women and individuals serving a six-county area. Paula Hughes-Schuh is the Executive Director. They are relocating from their current South Fort Wayne location to the former Halls Guesthouse on West Washington Center Road. The new building will increase their current 116 beds to 244 beds and will be called The Hefner Center. They are relocating some services in April and will be fully relocated by the end of 2024. The cost of the acquisition / renovation is approximately nineteen million dollars. They maintain a 24/7 crisis line helping to educate over 7,600 youth and adults about domestic violence and healthy relationships. In 2022 they also provided safe housing for 672 adults and children along with providing 94 residents with residential addiction recovery services.

**St. Joseph Missions Women’s Shelter** is located in the 3500 block of Lake Avenue and offers emergency shelter for up to 18 single homeless women at a time. It has served single women in need who have nowhere to live and thus are vulnerable to become victims of sex trafficking, violence, and abusive relationship. It has served over 200 women since its founding in June 2021. Erin Ness is the Executive Director.

**The Fort Wayne Rescue Mission;** Led by Reverend Thomas McArthur. Reverend Donovan Cooley, is the former CEO. Housed in the large new four-story building at Lafayette and Washington. Best known for its **Residential Programs** - 122 beds for men participating in the Short-Term residential program lasting 3-6 months with medium and the long-term residential program lasting up to one year. They also have fifty beds for residential housing ministry for women and children at a separate location branded as Charis House. Both also have **30-day Short -term Housing Program** – 150 beds for men and 30 beds for women at Charis House. There is an invitation to join the full residential program if a choice for real change is demonstrated by the resident. During called emergencies, like sub-zero temps, 100 cots can be added into the Mission. In 2023 the Rescue Mission averaged 329 people in safe shelter during the night. They estimate 75% of their residents have or have yet to be diagnosed with mental health illness. The third floor is currently empty in their building and is planned for future programs. The Rescue Mission’s **Community Meals Program** is open to the general public at 7 AM, Noon and 5 PM daily for men, women and children with over 250,000 meals served per year (Almost 1,000 meals per day average in 2023 – a 37% increase over 2022) A new offering this year is that the non-profit **Alliance Health Center Clinic** opened within the doors of the Rescue Mission in October 2023 offering primary care and behavioral health services.

**Just Neighbors - Interfaith Homeless Network;** As part of my research, I interviewed Pastor Joshua Gale – Executive Director. Just Neighbors created an amazing program to solve homelessness in Allen County. In 2021, Fort Wayne had the 13<sup>th</sup> largest eviction rate in the nation.

Just Neighbors worked to establish a new and fair eviction protocol within the Allen County Court system. The reality is that the eviction of tenants from rental units within Allen County hurts both the tenants along with the financial negative outcomes for the landlords. Working with a cohort of 145 Allen County landlords, a logical and understandable set of protocol changes was made in November 2022. Two required eviction hearings became one with an adequate twenty-day notice for residents before the scheduled hearing was set. A Just Neighbors Eviction Intervention staff member attends the eviction hearing with the client. They do not provide legal advice. That initial hearing's goal is to assist, resolve or agree for both parties to participate in the Eviction Diversion Program. The new protocol "will further the goals of transparency and efficiency through a standardized process for all parties." 2,897 evictions have been avoided. Limited financial assistance has been "invested" in 298 cases. Of those 298, amazingly only 3 households have been evicted. Allen County has gone from 13<sup>th</sup> highest in the nation in 2021 in evictions to NOT being listed in the top 100 cities in 2023!

**Transitional Housing – Vincent Village;** Quester Sharon Tucker is the Executive Director that offers the Vincent House Shelter for 30 individuals and 34 Village Rental Homes scattered in Southeast Fort Wayne centered at Pontiac Street and Holton Avenue. I've had the privilege to tour the Vincent Village campus a few years ago and greatly admire their program. They offer the wrap-around support and services needed for families to stay housed. They work with families to pay off debt, learn how to budget, and raise their credit scores. Vincent Village is utilized when there are not only financial strains but other extenuating circumstances and underlying causes that affect stable housing. By providing stability, support and resources, Vincent Village provides housing for over 200 individuals every year keeping them housed,

providing services that prevent eviction and end the cycle of homelessness. Residents may stay for up to five years in the rental housing. Offered services are fundamental for obtaining and maintaining employment, paying down debt, enhancing one's education and skills, improving mental and physical health, or simply eliminating chronic stress levels. – all necessary outcomes to change mindsets for long-term stability.

**Youth Aging out of the Foster Care System** – It is estimated that 65% of youth that age out of foster homes when turning 18 don't have a place to live. 40% of those in homeless shelters are former foster children. The Courtyard is a thirty-six one and two-bedroom housing development built in 2014. It was the first supportive housing in Indiana serving youth aged 18-25 who are aging out of foster care, experiencing homelessness, or risk of homelessness. Residents are required to pay rent but pay no more than 30% of income because of the housing vouchers from the Fort Wayne Housing Authority. SCAN was the fiscal sponsor and offers case management to develop goals for self-sufficiency.

**School Corporation's Student Assistance Programs** – Of all the individuals touched by the homeless care system in our community, 40% are children. The McKinney Vento Act, enacted into federal law in 1987, requires every school corporation to have a liaison to assist un-housed students. Un-housed is defined as children who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night time residence including couch surfing, living in a car, shelter, park or unaccompanied youth who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian or awaiting foster care placement. In the 2021-22 school year Fort Wayne Community Schools assisted more than 940 students experiencing homelessness. The law requires homeless students to be transported to their

home schools wherever they may be living in the district preserving their social network and dignity in the transition.

**In Conclusion** - Last fall I attended a panel discussion of 16 local experts at the Rescue Mission's event for National Hunger and Homelessness Week. One common theme they repeated. "One size does not fit all". "Housing will never solve homelessness but community will."

In Allen County, there are other fine homeless assistance programs that prevent or fight homelessness. These include: Post-Incarceration Programs, Veterans Programs, Mental and Behavioral Health groups, Alcohol and Chemical Dependency Treatment Programs. Other programs for the greater good include food banks, programs in your local churches, youth development programs and an excellent literacy education program like The Literacy Alliance; I began my paper referencing a quote 18 years ago from Pastor Frazier. The state of homelessness in Allen County is now different. Many more specific offerings exist targeting vulnerable populations. In my conservative estimate **500 more beds** now exist in 2024 than in 2006. There are hurdles to overcome; Great progress has been made to address homelessness with Fort Wayne as a compassionate hub in our region.

I will end with the words from Sally Segerson of Street Reach for the Homeless:

*Search for your compassion, increase your knowledge to erase the unknown and rid yourself of biases that are merely judgements against these men and women. Recognize the humanity of each of these individuals as you look into their eyes and offer a smile and warmth. That act of humanity is the beginning of change.*

Thank you.

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