

Homeless in NH

EDITORIAL

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu is a busy guy. Just ask him. “I’m a governor, I’m 24/7,” Sununu recently told the Politico news outlet. “My phone is on. You have a flood, you have a disaster, you have a problem with corrections. It’s a hard job. And then you add running every two years. It’s too much for folks, it really is.”

Perhaps this explains why it has escaped the governor’s attention that New Hampshire is experiencing a full-blown homelessness crisis. It did not rate even a passing mention in the four-term Republican’s inaugural address last week.

What transpired during the holiday week at the end of December should have served as a wake-up call for Sununu. Two homeless people died in Manchester — one in a tent outside a shelter and another in a homeless encampment in the woods — bringing to 95 the number of unhoused people who perished in 2022 in New Hampshire.

If that were not horrific enough, a 26-year-old homeless woman gave birth to a premature baby boy in the extreme cold on Christmas night in a tent made out of tarps, also in Manchester. Thank-fully, the child was alive when authorities located him, and he is being treated at Dartmouth Hitch-cock Medical Center. Meantime, his mother, Alexandra Eckersley, whom family members say has suffered from severe mental illness her entire life, was arrested on several charges — which is evidence enough that the state’s response to homelessness urgently needs to be re-examined and overhauled.

In a statement, Eckersley’s adoptive parents, Nancy and Dennis Eckersley, the Hall of Fame pitcher and iconic Red Sox broadcaster, noted that since she was 20 years old, their daughter had chosen to live on the streets of New Hampshire, where, “as in many states, the mental health system” is broken. It is hard to argue with that assessment, even though improvements have been made recently. Sununu had no comment.

With these tragedies as a backdrop, the mayors of eight cities, including Claremont, addressed an appeal to Sununu for help. According to the In-DepthNH news site, they pointed to the inadequacy of state services for those struggling with mental illness, addiction, a history of trauma or incarceration, and chronic health conditions — all substantial contributors to homelessness. According to the mayors’ letter to the governor, 4,500 New Hampshire residents will experience homelessness at some point

to InDepthNH.

Certainly, more emergency shelter beds are critically needed, and state government should respond accordingly. The city of Lebanon is among those communities desperately seeking to open such a shelter, but this is likely to be a challenge, given the probability of neighborhood backlash to whatever sites are identified. One answer could be using state-owned property for this purpose.

In the longer term, state policy should encourage the development of what’s called permanent supportive housing for those who have experienced chronic homelessness. For example, Twin Pines Housing Trust, the nonprofit affordable housing organization based in White River Junction, developed and has managed for the past four years a highly successful 18-unit project in Lebanon called Parkhurst Community Housing, in which rental assistance is combined with support services to help households achieve housing stability. Twin Pines is planning another such project for Hartford.

But the only real solution to homelessness in the long run is the creation of more affordable housing, because when all is said and done, the root of the problem is too few houses for too many people. Yes, homelessness can be attributed to personal failure in some cases; but in many others, unlucky breaks — which life is full of — can push ordinary folks into a homeless state that defies their best efforts to escape.

State government should be a full partner with local communities in a comprehensive and coordinated effort to alleviate homelessness in the short term, and to create the necessary conditions for its eradication in the long term. We urge Sununu to recognize this imperative, and channel New Hampshire’s considerable resources into creating a future where having an affordable roof over one’s head is not a matter of a roll of life’s dice.

during 2023; the number of individuals who have experienced homelessness without access to shelters has almost tripled since the beginning of the pandemic.

Among their requests: Immediately increase the number of emergency shelter beds statewide, especially for women and youth; and ramp up collaboration and transparency in state programs dealing with the homeless. They also asserted that a similar letter sent to Sununu in 2020 went unheeded. The governor and the Department of Health and Human Services didn't respond to a request for comment, according

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