

Housing shortage is a community-wide issue

COMMENTARY

By MICHAEL REDMOND

For the Valley News

“Do we have homelessness here?” many Upper Valley residents asked only a few years ago. Rural homelessness has often been invisible to many in our communities. The pandemic changed that. On a per capita basis, Vermont now has the second-highest level of homelessness in the country. And here in the Upper Valley, we’re on the front lines of an increasingly visible crisis of housing and homelessness.

The Hartford district covering northern Windsor and Orange counties has more than 150 households experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This summer, Lebanon identified more than 36 unhoused people. This crisis has left a growing number of people living outside, on town streets, cars, sleeping in dumpsters, in the woods and under bridges and straining the capacity of states, municipalities and organizations, including the Upper Valley Haven.

Left unchecked, this crisis will put the growing ranks of unsheltered community members at risk of death and harm as winter approaches and add to the challenges of unhoused individuals and families throughout the year. While this problem will be solved only through the addition of permanent housing, our work at the Haven tells us that we must implement interim measures as we pursue more lasting solutions. To meet these needs, the Haven is working on two projects to add shelter beds in the Upper Valley.

In New Hampshire, the Haven is partnering with the city of Lebanon to bring a new 15-bed seasonal shelter online this winter. Lebanon has purchased and is renovating a building on Mechanic Street that the Haven will staff and operate with funding support

service providers.

In Vermont, the Haven will soon bring a proposal before the Hartford Planning Commission to renovate the old 25,000 Gifts building on North Main Street in White River Junction and develop an emergency shelter. If approved, the new shelter, scheduled to open in early 2025, will add 20 desperately needed beds and provide safe accommodations for many people we are not currently able to serve in our existing shelter programs. The new shelter also builds on the Haven’s longstanding history of connecting people to permanent housing.

We have designed the new shelter to balance the urgent need for interim solutions to this crisis with best practices in homelessness response. We will transform a community eyesore into a beautiful and dignified space that symbolizes our collective effort to address this challenge. It will feature showers, laundry facilities, a kitchen where meals can be prepared, storage for personal belongings, access for pets, computers for job search and communication with government agencies and internet connections. Integration of supportive services and round-the clock staffing will provide continuous support for shelter guests. Daytime services will allow people the opportunity to participate in education, training and provision of health and other services by visiting organizations.

We recognize that homelessness service providers alone can’t solve this problem. It will take the entire community to come together. And we believe this is not the responsibility of one or two municipalities; both state and regional responses and resources are needed. The Haven stands ready to leverage our expertise and experience as part of a community-wide solution from which we all will benefit. We

and communities must invest in proven strategies to end homelessness. We don’t lack proven ideas. As a priority, we must increase the supply of affordable housing in our community and continue to address the zoning and other barriers that have contributed to the current crisis. The Haven works extensively with Twin Pines Housing, our community affordable housing developer, which has developed and manages over 550 affordable apartments with several projects in the pipeline, many with supportive housing services provided by the Haven. Lebanon and Hart-ford have implemented and are exploring further changes in zoning rules.

Thinking more creatively about how to provide resources to people who are unhoused and not penalize or criminalize them is also essential. In the meantime, the Haven hopes to create more places where people without a bed to sleep in can be welcomed and supported.

Michael Redmond is executive director of the Upper Valley Haven in White River Junction.

from Lebanon. We are currently recruiting staff for this shelter and making all the other preparations needed to meet this deadline. When asked why Lebanon was taking on this effort, City Manager Shawn Mulholland responded, "Because it will save lives." We appreciate the proactive role that Lebanon has taken to address this crisis and its choice to work closely with community

welcome the development of partnerships with local governments, other service providers, people who are experiencing housing instability and homelessness and local residents who believe the Upper Valley should reflect a generous spirit of caring for everyone. As we work to bring interim solutions online, states

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