

...Why are there so many homeless in Woodstock today?

You may think: *“Homelessness in the United States is a matter of choice; after all, we are an affluent society and those who are homeless have either made poor life choices or simply decided to abrogate responsibility for themselves, placing the burden on society”.*

Here are the facts: Homelessness has been a part of communities for as long as societies have existed. The root causes and social responses, however, have changed over time. Today, homelessness is on the rise in the United States and has become a major issue facing larger metropolitan areas, suburban communities and even small rural communities, particularly if those communities serve as the seat of county government. Further, people experience homelessness in different ways:

- **Crisis homelessness** is a one-time experience that lasts for a year or less.
- **Episodic homelessness** is a pattern in which people are homeless for multiple, short periods.
- **Chronic homelessness** is an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more OR an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

Why is homelessness on the rise?

There are many reasons for the increase in the number of people who are homeless. The Northeastern Illinois Regional Roundtable on Homelessness commissioned the University of Illinois at Chicago to conduct the region’s most comprehensive study ever conducted on homelessness in Chicago and its suburbs. The landmark study confirmed there are often multiple and complex reasons people become homeless. However, homelessness results from three basic root causes or combinations thereof:

- **Economic hardship:** The inability to pay rent is by far the most common cause of homelessness. Losing a job (49%) and being cut off from or receiving inadequate public assistance (40.6%) are major contributing factors.
- **Health issues:** Health problems are significant causes of homelessness, including substance abuse (46.3%) and physical (18.6%) or mental health problems (13.5%).
- **Leaving precarious situations:** Leaving an unstable situation, such as a “doubled-up” living arrangement (42%) or an institutional setting (47%), including a hospital, mental health facility, or prison, often leads to homelessness.

The McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness annually conducts a *Point in Time Survey* which identifies McHenry County homelessness resulting from these primary factors:

- Substance use (drug and alcohol addiction) 11.2%
- Mental illness 19.0%
- Veterans 12.5%
- Domestic violence 22.8%
- Chronic health condition 3.2%
- Disability 7.7%
- Other, including economic hardship 23.6%

The high cost of housing creates an economic hardship contributing to the homeless condition. In McHenry County, the median rent for any size of household unit is \$1,048 per month. Although not that different from other suburban Chicagoland counties, it is higher than the \$983 median monthly rent of Cook County and the \$905 median monthly rent for the State of Illinois.

When juxtaposed with household incomes, the concern associated with the cost of housing becomes evident. In McHenry County, an individual earning a minimum wage of \$8.25 per hour and working 40 hours per week would need to spend \$6.55 per hour worked or 79% of their wages to afford the median rental unit. A level of 30% or higher is considered a *rent burden*.

McHenry County reports that 2.0% of the population or 6,169 live in *extreme* poverty in which *extreme* poverty is defined as receiving an annual income below fifty percent of the federal poverty threshold. Further, 21.1% or 4,855 households in McHenry County experience *extreme* rent burden; that is, households in which fifty percent or more of income is spent on housing costs.

But why are we seeing so many homeless people in Woodstock?

The total number of people who are homeless in Woodstock has remained relatively constant for the past few years. There are several reasons we have a homeless population in the community and why we seem to see more this year than previous years:

- Woodstock is the McHenry County Seat and the location of the county court system, as well as many social service agencies.
- For the past few years, a number of the individuals in Woodstock's homeless population have lived in four to five campsites located largely out-of-sight on both public and private property. This year, due to concerns regarding garbage and property damage, private property owners requested the City of Woodstock remove those campsites. As a result, the population was displaced to other more visible areas of the community.
- Drug and alcohol addiction is on the rise.
- The State of Illinois closed State Mental Health Facilities and the population was forced back into communities and, too often, onto the streets.
- Many family households feel unable to provide for or cope with the magnitude of issues surrounding family members experiencing addiction, mental illness, or physical and psychological trauma and force those afflicted out of the household as a defensive or protective measure.
- Domestic violence is on the rise and victims often retreat to homelessness in order to avoid violence and abuse in the home.
- More Veterans are returning from active duty and find themselves unable to secure employment or in particularly challenging mental and physical health circumstances.
- Although approximately 36% of Woodstock's housing stock is composed of rental units and the average monthly rent is \$939, nearly 49% of individuals and families renting in the City are rent burdened; that is, they pay more than 30% of their gross income towards rent. Sudden reductions in income due to job loss or illness have a devastating effect on housing affordability. Similar circumstances exist in communities throughout McHenry County.

- People who are homeless find the Park in the Square and downtown area an attractive location to spend time, just as other residents and visitors.
- Woodstock is on the METRA Line and the train station is located in the heart of the City. Ease of access contributes to greater residential and visitor presence, as well as the presence of people who are homeless.
- Woodstock is a very inclusive, compassionate and giving community. When we see areas of need, we work to address those needs. As a result, many individuals, businesses, organizations and churches consistently reach out to provide food, clothing, bicycles, personal care items and more to help homeless individuals. While having a reputation for being a caring community is a source of pride, it also encourages a homeless presence and, in some instances, enables irresponsible behavior.
- The opening of the Old Firehouse Assistance Center on South Street provides a location for displaced individuals to gather with the assurance of a meal, shower, social services, medical treatment, mental health evaluation, referrals, other services, and a respite from extreme outdoor temperatures. The center is open five days a week, Monday through Friday 9:00 am-3:00 pm. It does not provide overnight accommodation and those who are served must be able to prove they have been a resident of McHenry County for 90 days or more. The service center is a gathering place on South Street and, as a result, the homeless population in the City has become more visible.

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