

Homelessness in Maine: A Solvable Problem

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October 19, 2007

**Civic Engagement Essay Contest
University of Maine Augusta**

It affects men, women, and children. It does not discriminate between socioeconomic groups, race, education level, or age. It can happen overnight or over a period of time. It can be caused by sudden illness, loss of transportation, loss of employment, substance abuse, mental illness, family conflict and domestic violence. It occurs in rural, urban, and suburban areas. It does not care about town, county, state, country or continent boundaries. It doesn't care which political party is in power. It doesn't care who it affects and whether or not it ends. It is homelessness.

Homelessness is an age-old condition of the human race. The nomadic nature of humans throughout history is a classic example of the current definition of homelessness and many would assert that this condition is a self-induced state of existence that is less a social problem and more a trait of humans that has yet to evolve into an ability to obtain and retain stable shelter. Yet even with this observation of human nature, one cannot deny that a society within a globally influential country like the United States should be able to shelter all its inhabitants with safe, affordable, stable housing.

But what is homelessness? Are there homeless persons in Maine? Who is homeless? Why are they homeless? When are they homeless? Where are they homeless?

Homelessness is a person's state of not having a place where they can sleep at night – at least, not one that is meant for human habitation. And on January 30, 2007, there were an estimated 829 persons homeless in Maine – 109 were families that included 208 children.¹ This is an increase of 27 families and 66 more children than in 2006; almost 200 people and 100 children more than were identified by the same means of counting as homeless in 2004. But more importantly, this is the estimate of the number of persons homeless on just *one* night of the year ~ in reality, it is likely that there are over 8,000 persons homeless annually in Maine².

For the State of Maine, whose population is only 1.3 million³, this is a staggering number. This means that 1 out of every 163 persons living in Maine is homeless within a 12 month time. And at almost 25%⁴ of the homeless population, this places 2,000 of Maine's children in emergency shelter or on streets every year.

The person who is homeless could be the person sitting next to you right now. Over 5,000 males and almost 3000 females are homeless in Maine annually⁵. Those without adequate shelter in Maine are predominantly white, aged 20 – 29, with a significant percentage of veterans (more than 10%). 79% of these persons are from Maine. 14% of them indicate they had been consistently homeless for more than a year ~ and half of

¹ 2007 State of Maine Point in Time Survey, <http://www.mainehousing.org/Documents/HousingReports/2007HomelessPointInTimeSurvey.pdf>

² 2006 Maine State Housing homeless estimate (based on manual reporting for Emergency Shelter Grant management)

³ U.S. Census 2006 Estimated Population

⁴ PIT percentages: child count to total count

⁵ PIT percentages: 63% males and 37% females

them had been homeless more than 2 years. 30% of the unsheltered clients surveyed during the 2007 point in time count reported they were unsheltered because the emergency shelters were full.

Homelessness exacerbates substance abuse issues, mental illness, and physical health. It causes family dissolution, incarceration, and leaves it's victims without hope. People starve. Women, children and men are in constant danger of sexual assault and physical abuse. Persons who are not substance abusers are at much higher risk to become substance abusers once they become homeless. Homelessness is caused by poor economic status, natural disaster, unavailability of affordable housing, lack of livable wages, divorce, domestic violence, and unexpected health problems.

Not having a home is only part of the problem. About half of the 2007 surveyed clients indicated that they had a disabling condition. In addition, an inability to find work or pay their rent, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and lack of transportation accounted for the top reasons why persons became homeless. Unfortunately, domestic violence plays its own undeniable part in how women and children become homeless.

The majority of the homeless population is in Androscoggin, Cumberland, Kennebec and Penobscot counties (76%)⁶, yet only 49% of the state's entire population is in those 4 counties. 83% of the homeless population reported income at or below federal poverty guidelines but more than 50% of them had a high school education or higher.

Homelessness is a problem with far reaching impacts. Our inability to house our population reflects on our societal beliefs as a nation, impacting our global reputation and other country's perceptions of us. It is not surprising that other countries view us as an unfeeling, uncompassionate nation that cares not for its underprivileged and those who cannot care for themselves. And with that perception, how can other countries believe we will care for them as we try to establish democracies and individual rights in the global arena? In many of their eyes, we are selfish and self-centered and we have done little to improve the perception.

On a practical note, homelessness is expensive. In a recent study of 99 chronic⁷ homeless clients⁸ in Maine, it was found that the cost to public emergency healthcare providers (hospitals, police, and fire departments), jails, and emergency shelters for a single person who was homeless was almost \$30,000 per year. With more than 8,000 homeless persons annually in Maine, the cost to our community can be estimated at \$240,000,000.00 (\$240 million dollars) per year – and that's just the actual cash. A homeless presence in a community affects so much more.

⁶ 2006 Maine Continuum of Care Point in Time Survey.

⁷ HUD's definition of chronic homeless: individual's with a disability who are homeless more than 365 consecutive days or who have experienced 4 or more episodes of homelessness within the last 3 years.

⁸ *Cost of Homelessness, Cost Analysis of Permanent Supportive Housing, State of Maine – Greater Portland*, Sept 2007. Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing)

Aside from the affects to homeless persons directly, homelessness affects entire communities. Homeless populations in communities affect a community's ability to attract new residents, businesses, and tourists. People are afraid to walk down streets where homeless people sleep on sidewalks; parents shuffle their children quickly past and try to ignore those who have fallen into homelessness. Homelessness is a negative reflection on the community, its residents and political systems. Businesses have a hard time maintaining stable workforces because their workers are constantly at risk or are homeless. Homelessness is a global problem that is evidenced in our own backyards.

While ending homelessness seems like a good goal, more attainable is a commitment to decrease the number of persons experiencing homelessness through prevention services, reduce recidivism (clients reappearing on the streets), increasing supportive services to assist clients in managing mental illness and substance abuse disorders, maintaining affordable housing, and supporting an economic environment that manages earned wages in conjunction with living costs. Coupled with educational goals, including basics like personal money management and parenting skills, these activities will go a long way towards preventing homelessness before it strikes.

In the State of Maine, there are some specific activities that could improve the environment that addresses homelessness.

First, the state already has an organizational system whose mission is to manage homelessness. This system is made up of a Statewide Homeless Council, 3 Regional Homeless Councils, 3 Continuums of Care, and countless homeless service providers. There are 3 distinct issues with this system: 1) the mission is to manage homelessness, not end it, and 2) the persons making up these organizations are all representatives of state agencies and service providers – whose focus is to maintain and increase funding streams to continue their own agency's programs, and 3) these state agencies and service providers have a desire to maintain existing programs that pay their salaries and benefits.

While all of these organizations stakeholders to the process, they are too close to the money that "feeds" them, and are unable to make decisions that are best for community and homeless clients ~ in many cases, this inability to influence funding streams could mean loss of their own jobs. No real advancement in solving homelessness will be solved until agencies and providers can be freed from this funding dilemma and become willing to change what they do. The communities who are most successful at decreasing homelessness are those who take the community planning and implementation of plans to end homelessness, the allocation of funds, approval for new developments and services, and changes to existing services out of the hands of funding streams, their recipients (the service providers), and political hands.

Second, the public needs to realize how expensive the ongoing management of homelessness has become and understand some of the reasons why change has been slow or non-existent. Recall the study of the cost of homelessness for the 99 homeless clients in Portland. In the first year after placing those clients into permanent, supported housing, the community "saved" \$93,436. Saved is a relative word. This was income to

someone. If need decreases, so does the need for staff at emergency shelters, police stations, emergency rooms, and rescue services. But, if those services are no longer being billed in such excess, then perhaps insurance and pharmaceutical costs will go down.

Critics of the study in Portland will cite that the housing and support of homeless individuals versus the expense of homeless shelters and emergency services is a small one – only about \$1000.00 per year per client. But the study clearly shows that the stress to the community decreases and the quality of life of the formerly homeless increases. There is less crime committed by these formerly homeless persons and they are working towards education and employment goals that will eventually leave them independent of the homeless system. And you won't know if you passed one of them on the street in Portland. So the question becomes a philosophic one: To serve or to house? Is it better to spend \$1000.00 less per client per year and have fewer people on the street, or leave systems as they are and have more people on the street?

But realignment of services and expenditures is just a piece of the puzzle. In some communities in Maine, the availability of services would go a long way. It is no coincidence that the major of Maine's homeless appear in 4 counties. Those counties - in particular Cumberland County – are the ones that have the services that at risk and homeless clients need – and they are not readily available elsewhere. Cumberland County hosts a large hospital, rescue services, access to mental health and substance abuse treatment, public transportation, job training and employment linkages, and the largest number of emergency beds, both individual and family, in the state. Coupled with a city ordinance that mandates that no one will sleep on the streets, and you've got a recipe for a large homeless population – simply by virtue that you can get what you need should you become homeless in Portland.

Third, affordable housing must be built. Many homeless have jobs and other sources of income, but they cannot afford or cannot find a place to live. Even if support systems are in place to support these persons in becoming more stable, they still must have an apartment or house to live in. In Augusta, for example, the City is doing a poor job in assuring affordable housing. This will become more and more critical as they continue to support development of service industry jobs, such as the retail industry, where wages earned from these jobs do not match the amount necessary to obtain and maintain housing in this area. Augusta may provide jobs, but they may find in the very short future a shortage of workers due to lack of public transportation or close affordable housing.

There are two primary influences for solving the problem of homelessness in Maine – community awareness and community involvement. Awareness of the problem brings insight into the plight of people affected by homelessness. This can lead to awareness of how the problem is being dealt with, what monies are available, how it is utilized for dealing with the problem, and what barriers there are to correcting the problem sooner than later. Community involvement is an influential factor because it drives the work towards solutions. Community involvement can affect the political process by causing

our political leaders to make homelessness a priority and demand solutions from lawmakers, service agencies, and communities. Community involvement can influence the use of funds, the building of affordable housing in stressed areas, and the availability of prevention and solution services.

There are many misperceptions about who the homeless are. For many people, they do not even realize that the problem of homelessness exists in our grand State. But the problem is not only here, it's growing. It's expensive and leaves 8,000 persons annually without shelter or quality of life. Almost everyone has been touched by homelessness, whether they realize it or not. With community awareness and involvement, we can influence this problem toward resolution. After all, Maine is the way life should be. Shouldn't it be that way for all?