

Chemical Dependency and Homelessness in Appleton

A freedom of information request was done to highlight the relationship between chemical dependency and homelessness in Appleton. The data showed the tight-knit relationship between homelessness and chemical dependency. Page three of the FOIA report shows that 32% of homeless people in Appleton are currently chemically dependent.

Betsy Borns, a street outreach case manager at Pillars Inc. was tasked with conducting project RUSH. The research for the project took place in various locations around the city and included interviews from over 600 homeless adults living in Appleton to learn what these people need and how they got into the predicament they are in. This research was presented to city officials to explain the need for affordable housing programs and opportunities for support in the city of Appleton.

“These people are not bad or inferior in any way. Most of them are victims of circumstances that grew up without guidance or basic care,” Borns said.

In the report there is a section that displays what kind of out-of-home placement most homeless people in Appleton have been in. The research shows that 21% of homeless people are placed in a rehabilitation clinic for drugs and/or alcohol, and another 76% end up in jail. Of those that spent time in jail, 88% of them said they received no aftercare or follow-up services upon discharge.

Borns said she believes the system is unfit to serve these people, she said, “It’s a broken system, when someone has nowhere to go at night, and the temperatures are unbearable,

committing a crime and spending the night in jail is their best option, at least they're guaranteed a warm bed and three hot meals."

With shelters at full capacity, especially during colder months, the waiting list can be as long as 40 or 50 days. Emily Peterson, a current street outreach case manager at Pillars Inc. says that it's difficult for many of her clients to wait around for a spot to open up.

"I work with about 25 clients currently and I know seven of them that will, and have, committed a crime to spend the night in jail when they're in need of a warm place to sleep."

She said many of them do not see a crime such as retail theft or public intoxication as one that will tarnish their less-than perfect existing records.

In order to better understand the impact drugs and alcohol and have on this community, project RUSH inspected possible reasons these people have fallen into addiction and homelessness.

Trauma, stemming as far back as childhood, has proven to be a large factor in this issue. The data shows that 64% of females and 40% of males that are living on the streets have experienced physical abuse and/or neglect as a child. Furthermore, 46% of females and 20% of males experienced sexual abuse in their childhood.

"When it comes down to it, sleeping in a warm shelter, in the middle of January, is a human's number one priority," Peterson said.

The data also shows that 40% of females and 20% of males have engaged in sexual acts for a warm place to sleep. Peterson said these statistics are all products of broken homes and lives of trauma.

"It's not about how people deal or cope with their trauma, but rather what kind of support they have," Peterson said.

The shelters that are in place for these people are made clear to be drug and alcohol free. Upon arrival their bags and personal items are searched, and any sort of drugs or paraphernalia found will be confiscated. However, it is not a rehabilitation clinic, and people are free to do as they please before they enter the shelter at night.

Peterson said, “we know that many of these people spend their day on the prowl for whatever it is they need to get their fix”, but my job is to remember that, “we’re not therapists or counselors, we’re just here to give them somewhere safe to sleep at night.”

The daily struggle of a homeless person does not stop at looking for a warm place to sleep at night. Food and water are clearly needed to survive. There are many places that offer at least one hot meal a day to people in need. With long lines and a sometimes overwhelming commute to these places, homeless people resort to begging. Most of them are in need of much more than just food, water, or clothes. Some of them consume drugs instead of food.

“Some of my clients, even if they receive food from someone, will go and sell it to someone who’s hungrier than they are as a means to an end. It’s just a perpetual and slippery slope,” she said.

Bethany Belling, a waitress and mother of two, once knew a life without a home as an addict. Belling described her time as a heroin/fentanyl addict as a point in her life where she just wanted to numb her emotions. Belling said drugs were always around when she lived on the streets.

“When I was homeless, I ran into them everyday. I couldn't avoid them and they were always available.”

Belling said she received no help until she decided she needed it. “It took time, but all I had to do was ask for help, and that was the hardest part for me,” she said.

As a sober and reinvigorated mother Belling has had time to reflect on her past. She described it as, “Being homeless and on drugs is like quicksand. It’s like putting your hand on a hot stove over and over again. It’s painful and Lonely. My mindset is different now. Before, I’d hurt anyone and do anything to not be sick and get high. Now I get high off helping others, and being a kind and honest person. My addiction is a disease that I have to work on every day. I’m worth it and life is worth it”