

Benjamin Franklin put it nicely that only two things in life are guaranteed -death and taxes -but here in Nassau County, there's a third absolute: Wondering where all the affordable housing is.

At least that's the case for Joe Zimmerman, executive director for Coalition for the Homeless of Nassau County (CHN).

"A lot of homelessness is triggered by a lack of affordable housing," Zimmerman said. "We're not necessarily talking about people who are causing trouble. We're talking about entry-level firefighters who are making just over \$12 an hour, school teachers who are not making great incomes, entry-level police officers ^ people who are struggling with affordable housing."

According to the Florida Coalition to End Homelessness, Florida ranks third in the nation behind California and New York for homelessness. Another study by the National Alliance to End Homelessness revealed that a single homeless person costs taxpayers an average of \$35, 578 per year.

"If we're able to help these people become self-sufficient, productive members of society, or keep them in their home and their job, we're keeping them off the taxpayer dollar," Zimmerman noted.

Nassau's own coalition to battle homelessness, the CHN has an office on Amelia Island to provide services for those in need, whether that be a safe place to store important documents, get presentable for work or fight off starvation. Located at 1005 S. 14th St., the Day Drop-In Center is open Monday through Saturday from 9-11 a.m. The CHN prides itself as an "incubator" providing simple services no one else offers in Nassau County. Since its inception, the organization made quick work establishing close relationships with other groups to address any and all needs of the affected.

"We are in a planning stage of a more robust engagement program to bring people in from the business community and nonprofit sector to see how we can work together and increase outreach activities," Zimmerman said.

Recently, the CHN began preparations for a second location on the mainland to reach even more people, but in order to do so, the county must determine if community resource centers, with an emphasis on homelessness, are considered a public good.

The Planning and Zoning Board favorably voted July 26 to recommend these services as a public good to the Board of County Commissioners. The commission will make its final deliberation Monday, Sept. 12, at the James S. Page Governmental Complex.

This decision, however, was not universally celebrated. A neighbor of the proposed second location expressed concern that the CHN would "do nothing but cause problems for our household." "A lot of people say, 'Not in my backyard.' I understand why that lady doesn't want it next door to her, but that doesn't mean it's not the right place for something like that: The juvenile detention center is right across the street; Starting Point (Behavioral Healthcare) is a block away; Barnabas (Center) is next to you; and Gracie's Kitchen is served out of the sports complex," Zimmerman countered. "It's a 'community resource center' because it's not just the homeless we'll serve. We have people who work at Winn-Dixie, come in the morning and have a cup of coffee, check their mail, then go to work. They might crash at their friend's house at night. Our mission isn't just to serve the homeless, it's to prevent homelessness," Zimmerman expounded.

The road to ending homelessness and preventing future generations from falling prey starts with Zimmerman and the CHN, but the problem will only fester if the community-at-large turns the other cheek. As Zimmerman likes to say, these are your grocers, your police officers, your children's teachers -your community. The buck can't just stop with the names and faces you know. "This problem is not invisible," Zimmerman reminds. mmahoney@bnewsleader.com