

Nia Dumas

Ohio rural and urban community leaders describe their experiences with battling homelessness

Homelessness in rural and urban communities in Ohio looks very different, but facilities in both types of communities provide food, shelter, housing vouchers, clothing and hotel rooms to support unhoused individuals.

Ohio has estimated 10,655 people experiencing homelessness on any given day, according to the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. Out of 10,655 people experiencing homelessness, 906 of those are families, 730 are veterans, 753 are people facing chronic homelessness and 736 are unaccompanied young adults. In three of Ohio's largest cities and in rural counties the homeless epidemic varies.

Homelessness is a big problem

There are an estimated 23,000 people facing homelessness in Cuyahoga County, which contains Cleveland, with 10 percent of those people experiencing homelessness within a year, according to the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homelessness.

“On any given night I think there are about 2,000 people experiencing homelessness in our (Cleveland) shelter system who are identifiable and known by name,” said Christopher Knestrick, the executive director of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homelessness, oversees the organization and assists to combat the root cause of homeless in Greater Cleveland.

The number of homeless people may be smaller and less visible in rural areas, such as Knox County. The Winter Sanctuary, the only homeless shelter in the county, is only open during the winter months and provides rooms for 18 men and eight women, but it does not provide services for children. Families with children are placed in temporary stays at hotels or motels.

“Since we are a rural area most of the people in the community who experience homelessness live in the woods and sleep in their cars. It's really a hidden issue,” said Joe Springer, the operations manager for the Winter Sanctuary in Knox County, who oversees the day-to-day tasks at the shelter.

The approach to homelessness varies from location to location. In Ohio's capital city, Keith McCormish, director of the Columbus Coalition for Homeless, estimates about 80% of Columbus' total homeless population are in shelters. In Cincinnati, an estimated 11.9% of the population is unhoused, according to Strategies to End Homelessness.

Josh Spring, the executive director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, said there is no exact way of accounting for the true number of homeless people in Cincinnati. However, he is sure that homelessness in the city is the worst it has ever been.

“The Department of Housing and Urban Development doesn’t consider you to be without a home unless you are in a shelter that they know about or if you're living in a place that is not meant for human habitation,” Spring said. “This just means that they are the largest group of people facing homelessness.” The official tally does not account for families who can stay with friends or who sleep in their cars, for example.

Funding scarce for homeless shelters

In addition to providing shelter, homelessness organizations also provide advocacy and counseling to help people find stable housing and to prevent homelessness for people who are struggling. However, doing so is quite expensive, and the local agencies mainly depend on grants and their surrounding communities for support. Government funding is often small and unreliable.

“We don’t really get a lot of government support,” Springer said about the Knox County shelter. “We have gotten some money from the (federal) Emergency Food and Shelter Program to help with financial support to operate the shelter and also hotel stays for families with children.” The Winter Sanctuary also gets a grant from the United Way of Knox County, which allows the Winter Sanctuary to hire an advocate.

The Emergency Food and Shelter Program is a program that provides assistance for hungry and homeless people throughout the United States.

“We receive about 40,000 dollars from the General Operating Support Grant from the local government. Historically our local government has not been supportive when funding our work,” Knestrick said.

The amount of government support is relatively small in Cuyahoga County, Knestrick said. “We receive about \$40,000 from the ... local government,” he said. “Historically, our local government has not been supportive when funding our work.”

Families with children are placed in temporary stays such as hotels or motels.

The General Operating Support Grant provides funding to non-profit organizations.

The Columbus Coalition for Homelessness receives about 20,000 dollars from the city of Columbus. “This makes up about 20% of our budget for the warming-center wages,” McCormish said. The warming centers are operated by Columbus Coalition for the Homeless in downtown Columbus during the cold weather months.

The Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition does not accept any funding from the local or federal government. “We purposely don't take those dollars,” Spring said, because the organization does not want to rely on the government.

When the shelter reaches capacity, people within the community and churches provide food and often shelter for those in need.

Providing more than just a place to sleep

Although both organizations provide housing vouchers, there is a decrease in landlords willing to provide subsidized housing, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of the homeless shelters in both urban and rural Ohio focus on building relationships with their clients, and not just giving them a safe place to sleep.

“We try to form a strong bond with people without having any other expectations.” McCormish said. “Just knowing we want to be your friend makes a huge difference for people who are homeless. Then, all of a sudden, they magically might want to work with us.”

The Northeast Ohio Coalition for Homelessness has a Compassionate Care and Crisis Response team, through which the organization acts as first responder to homelessness and works to prevent homelessness from being criminalized. “We just give out humanitarian aid. But we don't force people to engage in our services,” Knestrick said.

“We just give out humanitarian aid. But we don't force people to engage in our services.” Knestrick said. “There was a guy we visited weekly for 10 years and every day he told us to leave for 10 years, then finally he said he was ready for some help and wanted to find housing.”

Urban and rural organizations also partner with other service organizations within their community to provide resources for their clients. For example, the Winter Sanctuary partners with Interchurch Social Services of Knox County, which provides local assistance to local communities, to provide free clothing to those who need it. The Winter Sanctuary also partners with Goodwill Industries to provide clients with small vouchers for clothing.

The Winter Sanctuary partners with Interchurch Social Services of Knox County, which provides local assistance to local communities, to provide free clothing to those who need it. The Winter Sanctuary also partners with the Goodwill to provide 25 dollar vouchers for clothing.

The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for Homelessness partners with the approximate 60 shelters in Hamilton County.