



HOMELESS in Gillette

As a boy growing up in Gillette during the 70s, Keith remembers watching the homeless shelter being built and thinking it was a waste of time and money.

“There are no homeless people in Wyoming,” he’d told his friends. “Why build one here?”

That he now finds himself staying there decades later is an irony not lost on him. Like many others at the shelter that night, his life had pretty much bottomed out.

It started a year-and-a-half ago, he said, when his mother passed away, and he was tasked with the daunting duties of putting her affairs in order and trying to sell her house.

Prior to this, he’d had a house and a good job stocking shelves for a local retailer where he’d been for five years. Before that, he’d worked as a mechanic and later did outside sales in the energy sector.

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

After losing his mother, however, he started to experience what felt like mini-heart attacks, which he now attributes to stress. It was these health problems that ultimately caused him to lose his job, and from there, he said his life spiraled out of control.

In his mid 50s, Keith had never been married, so he didn’t have a wife or children or other family members to help motivate and keep him afloat. Instead, he just wallowed in his grief, feeling sorry for himself.

He finally managed to sell his mother’s place last fall, and moved into an apartment.

He later rented a cheap hotel room when he could no longer afford to pay his monthly rent. When his money finally ran out, he had nowhere else to go.

“My life fell apart like a Chinese motorcycle,” he said.

Coming to the shelter for Keith was the most humiliating and humbling moment of his life, but he’s using the opportunity to claw his way back.

“You can’t get any lower than this,” he said, “and I knew it would motivate me.”

It has.

After roughly five years without work, he finally has a job again, and is now able to save his money, so he can get an apartment and eventually move out.



The Council of Community Service's Way Station has given him that opportunity, and without it, he would have had nowhere else to go.

CLOSE TO HOME

From the shelter, Keith can see his childhood home just a few blocks away. It's a complicated feeling of nostalgia and grief, and he's eager for the time when he's able to stand back on his own two feet.

He's grateful for the shelter and the staff, who he says treat him very well. Still, it's the shame of landing here that overwhelms him.

"I'm scared to death that people will drive by and see my vehicle in the parking lot," he said, looking down at his shoes.

But, at the same time, hitting rock bottom may have been the only way for Keith to make it back.

ON THE STREETS

Surprising to some, there are homeless people in Wyoming, including Gillette.

Last year, during the Annual "Point-in-Time" (PIT) Homeless Count, 873 homeless people were reported throughout the state, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Of those, 251 were homeless families with children, which is down slightly in Campbell County when compared to previous years. Last year, around 20 unsheltered people and families were counted locally during the annual PIT count, and this year's unsheltered number was under 10 in Gillette. Of these, some were families sleeping in their car in a gas station parking lot to individuals who have been chronically homeless for the past several years.

These once-yearly PIT counts have been conducted across the country since 2005, during which volunteers scour the town and county, tromping through parks, back alleys, parking lots, and other places where homeless have been known to congregate.

HUD requires this count during the last week of January, in order to identify the need in each community to receive federal funds. By their standards, a person qualifies as chronically homeless if he or she has a disability and has been continuously homeless at least a year or has experienced repeated episodes of homelessness in the last three years with a combined length of time of at least one year.

The funding model is determined by a number

of factors, including that state's population, level of poverty, and the annual PIT counts.

Apart from the PIT counts, the Council of Community Services counted 53 unsheltered people in Gillette last year, which is up from the prior year's 33.

ROCK BOTTOM

As the least populated state, Wyoming is also the least funded state when it comes to HUD dollars for homelessness. Apart from the annual PIT counts, in 2017, Wyoming received \$292,970 in funding.

Wyoming is notoriously short-changed when it comes to receiving housing funds. Compared to

neighboring states with similar demographics and topography, Wyoming is at the very bottom of the list.

Other neighboring states fare better when it comes to federal funding. Last year, South Dakota received a disbursement of \$1,294,469, North Dakota \$1,816,359, and Montana received a whopping \$2,500,597. By contrast, Oregon received more than \$18,120,000. Given those staggering figures, we're lightyears behind in the Cowboy State.

A WAY OUT

Locally, the Campbell County Council of Community Services relies heavily on grants, fundraisers, as well as local and state partnerships.



Tracy Obert, Council of Community Services housing program manager.

Meanwhile, the Way Station has had a packed house for the past couple months. In the month of January, they've averaged around 30 people a night. The facility only has 36 beds available, about half of which are currently filled by families with children.

Manager Sara Milner attributes this upsurge to the cold weather, and the continued relative high cost of housing in Gillette, which has lowered significantly in the waning years of the recent boom, but is still outside of reach for many people, particularly those attempting to get back on their feet after a life-altering situation has — for whatever reason — landed them out on the street.

SEEKING SHELTER

Like a mishmash family, Way Station residents gather in the heated covered porch, waiting for the shelter to open its doors at 5:30 p.m. They banter and share bits and pieces of their day and pet Gizmo the dog as she sniffs at their feet in her little plaid sweater.

Some of them are coming back from work while others have been idling the day away at the library or wandering through town until the shelter opened.

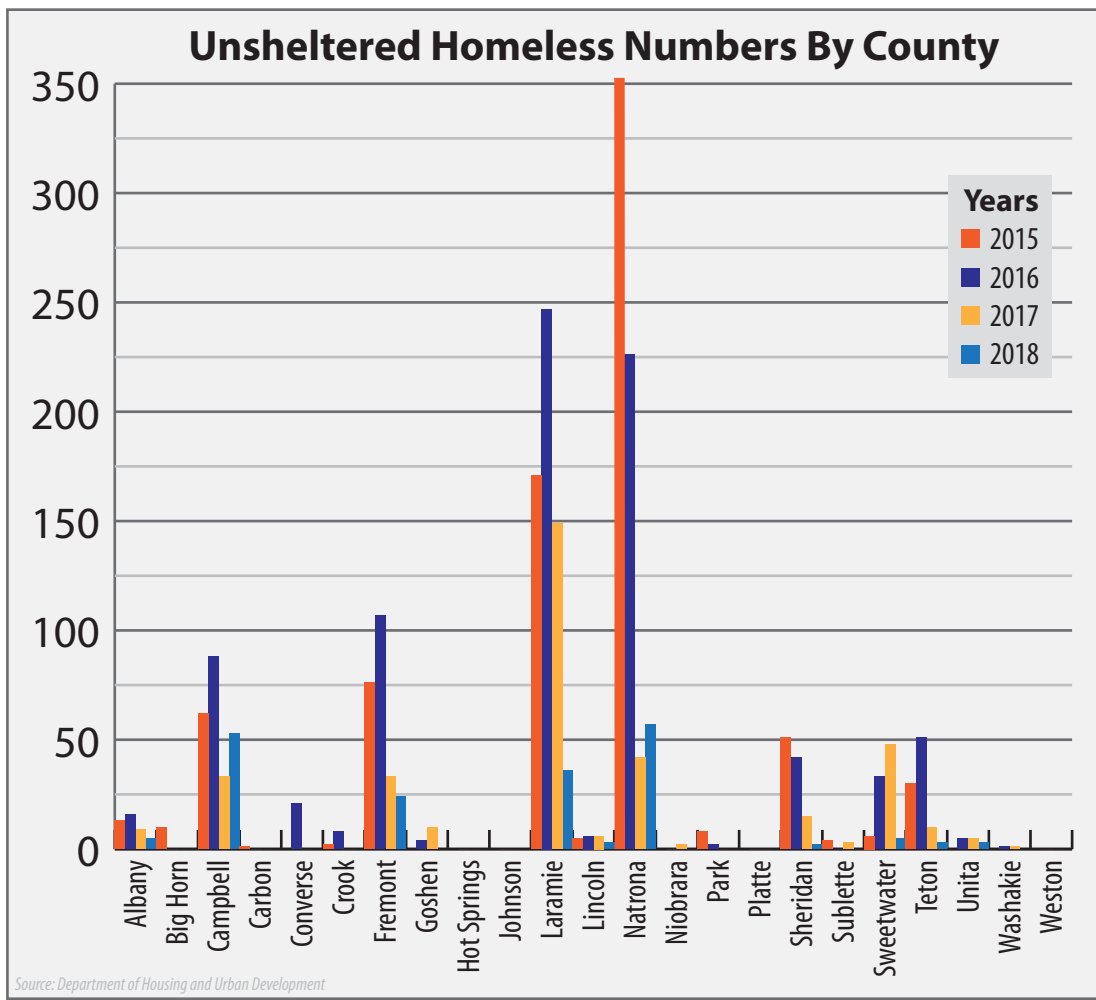
When the doors open, residents line up at the counter to fill out the necessary paperwork and breathe into the breathalyzer. Then, they go change into their night clothes, typically a pair of sweat pants and T-shirt provided by the shelter, while their own clothes get sterilized to kill off any bed bugs, and then are washed by the staff.

They go through a lot of bleach and laundry soap, Milner explained, now that they no longer charge the residents 50 cents for washing their own clothes.

The pantry has been pretty empty these days, a resident pointed out, so he tries to eat before he gets there. Depending on donations, sometimes there's food available, but other times they might go the night without eating. By 7 a.m., they all have to be out of the shelter after a cup of coffee, and the doors stay closed until evening, though in cold weather, they're allowed to gather on the enclosed porch.

uptick in numbers. To be low-barrier means to allow in people who once would have been banned under their former standards.

Though the staff initially fought the change, it's ended up being just fine, according to Milner and Tracy Obert, Council of Community Services housing program manager, who spends a lot of her time keeping up with the daily affairs of the shelter.



Thick snow blankets the ground as the temperature continues to plunge into the low 20s. On days like this, the red flag outside the shelter is raised, letting people know it's open to anyone, regardless of past incidents or other infractions that may have once got them kicked out. Infractions like drinking alcohol, fighting, or sexual harassment are not allowed inside the shelter.

Since HUD made them change their status last year to a low-barrier shelter, they have seen an

WALKING THE WALK

Tonight, Obert chats amiably with a fifth-grader as the girl whispers secrets in her ear and laughs. She's there with her family, who has spent the past couple weeks sleeping there each night. The girl's goal, she tells Obert, is to get her photograph taken with every single police officer in Gillette. Many nights officers drive over to the shelter for just that purpose. She did the same when they lived in Idaho, and when she

grows up, she plans to be a cop.

Obert smiles and gives the girl a shoulder hug. She has a big heart for the people who come to the shelter, because she knows exactly what it's like to be in their shoes.

There was a time, a couple decades ago, when she would have been one of the people lined up to enter at night. Hooked on methamphetamine and heroine after years in an abusive relationship, Obert and her two kids were living on the streets. Eventually, the kids were put in foster care as Obert's life plummeted to the point where she was finally able to get clean and turn her life around.

"When they say that drugs are the devil, they're not kidding around," she said.

She knows how it feels to lose everything and to live without hope. Gratefully, she was able to kick her addiction and make a positive and lasting change. She has been working at the Way Station for more than 12 years.

It's her own experiences that motivate her to help as many people as she can to get themselves off the streets and help them find a pathway back to a normal life, through supportive housing, for example, and other programs the council funds.

Along with the 36-bed Way Station shelter, there are two adjoining buildings with reduced rent apartments to help those who are working save money by paying nominal rent. Another assisted living facility is designed to help people who have kids in foster care align their lives with jobs and other necessary training of life skills, so that they can become able to get their children back.

LANDING ON THEIR FEET

Rock bottom, spiraling lives out of control, and trying to get back on one's feet are common refrains from many of the residents. To wind up at a homeless shelter, by default, is for many people the lowest point in their lives.



Some clearly are suffering from mental illness, while others have simply had a stretch of bad luck and are trying to come back. Casey, for example, has been staying at the shelter for a couple months. Typically, residents are allowed to stay for 30 days, and after that, if they prove they are making steps to repair their lives, that time can be extended up to 60 or 90 days, depending.

At nearly 40, Casey says he spends a big chunk of the day looking for work at Manpower and other

temp agencies, and sometimes, goes door-to-door shoveling snow. Originally from Casper, which he refers to as "down south," he's traveled around a lot, working mainly as a roofer. He'd been in Iowa when his dad died and he returned for his funeral.

Since then, he's been hanging out in Gillette, while he waits for his brother to get out of the Volunteers of America (VOA), a transitional living facility to help those who have been incarcerated adapt to everyday life. Once his brother gets out, the two

DONATE TO the Way Station

If you'd care to donate to the Way Station, they're always in need of bleach, men's sweatpants and T-shirts (in all sizes), laundry soap, combs and brushes, and travel-size soap, toothpaste, lotion, shampoo and conditioners, and any type of snacks or microwavable dinners.

Supportive Housing for Families

For families who are actively involved with the Department of Family Services (DFS), we offer a six-unit apartment building to help reunite families. Officially titled Permanent Supportive Housing for Families (also referred to as Phase or Way Station II) this supportive program allows families to work cooperatively with DFS and the CCS to build skills and work towards self-sufficiency.

Supportive Housing for Individuals with Mental Health Disabilities

Individuals with a mental health disability who have experienced chronic homelessness can find the support they need in our supportive eight-unit apartment building. Permanent Supportive Housing for Individuals (also referred to as Phase or Way Station III) allows people with a history of homelessness and mental health disabilities the opportunity to live independently while receiving the support they need to thrive.

Group Home for Adults

For adults with a severe and persistent mental illness we offer 24/7 supported living in our group home, the Greenhouse. The Greenhouse allows six residents to receive the tailored support they need to live healthy and productive lives.



plan to start a roofing company. Until then, he'll keep looking and hopefully spend his nights at the shelter.

Shane, another resident that night, is recovering from several knife wounds in his hand that prevent him from getting work until the doctor will release him. Originally from Sheridan, he has spent some time in prison after setting a truck on fire. He doesn't want to discuss his past; he's served his time, as far as he's concerned, and paid the price.

He wants to get on with his life and is tired of looking at "the downside of life," and is just waiting until he is able to work and plans to find a job, and then, an apartment.

Like some of the others, Matt is there because he's fallen on hard times. Originally from Kansas, he was a union teamster with a high-paying job, who married his high school sweetheart. Life had been going well until his wife developed bone cancer, which over the course of a decade, finally led to her death.

The last couple years of her life were spent in an assisted-living facility, which the couple's insurance

didn't cover. So, two years away from having his house fully paid off, Matt put it up for collateral. The bank took everything when he was unable to pay his bills, and eventually, he also lost his job.

The year after his wife's death he went on a full-time bender, going state-to-state as he blew through his 401k. Finally, he landed in Gillette, penniless, and ready to start again.

Now, he's working again and saving the money to get a place of his own.

He never imagined he'd be living at a homeless shelter, but at age 53, he's eager to turn his life around and start anew.

"I hear after 50," he said, "you can start reversing your numbers around. So, that makes me 35, and I'm ready to start again."

By: *Jem C. Kocher*

Editor's Note: Some of the names in the above story have been changed for anonymity, and last names have been purposefully omitted.

