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'One crisis, and it snowballs': Homelessness and the push to solve it in the southwest metro

Staff report
Nov 27, 2019

Editor's note

"Seeking Shelter" is a collaborative project between all of Southwest News Media's eight community papers on what homelessness looks like in the southwest metro.

SHAKOPEE — Kerry Kaufmann parked his Ford Explorer near the Minnesota River boat launch. His was the only vehicle in the parking lot, and he liked it that way.

A couple months ago, after he was evicted from a Shakopee apartment, he bought the truck for around \$2,000 and perched an air mattress and MyPillow in the back seat along with a heaping pile of laundry, a couple bags of food and a blanket.

He reports to his overnight shift, where he gets \$14 an hour and heat during increasingly cold nights, at 11 p.m. During the day, Kaufmann gets pockets of sleep near the river and hooks up his smartphone to his dashboard to watch TV.



Kerry Kaufmann stands by his SUV parked near the Minnesota River in Shakopee. Kaufmann attended Loaves and Fishes three times a week to receive a hot

“Seems like you can just never get warm,” Kaufmann said, shaking underneath his thin brown jacket, and it's only November. “My dream in life is to own a trailer home and a dog.”

Kaufmann has been working through a temp agency with new assignments every few weeks and hopes to scrounge up enough money to find a permanent

meal and get a break from the cold.

Photo by Rachel Minske

place. But his credit is in bad shape, and he doesn't know if any landlord would accept an application.

Hopefully next week he'll have enough money to crash at a motel for a week, he said. It will cost \$200, but at least he'll get a break from the exhaustion, from finding food, warmth or a bathroom every hour or so and interrupting his sleep.

Kaufmann didn't want pity. He said he struggles with managing his money and made choices that led him here.

He wants people to know that homelessness is in Scott County, in the run-down Ford near the County Highway 101 bridge.

-Maddie DeBilzan

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In 2010, Carver and Scott counties began a 10-year plan to end homelessness: By the year 2020, give all people in need in Scott and Carver counties access to safe, decent and affordable housing and the resources to sustain it.

In 2009, the group estimated 31 adults and 32 children were homeless on any given day in the counties. To make that number zero, the group proposed several funding and education goals as well as building 300 low-cost housing units in the two counties. A group of representatives from local nonprofits, churches, local governments and agencies gave their support.

Since its creation, the group has worked as a facilitator and meeting place for private and public agencies working on homelessness and related issues. They've created events like Project Community Connect, an annual fair where people can find food, health, housing and job services.

But homelessness persists.

Suzie Misel, housing and social services manager with the Community Action Partnership of Scott, Carver & Dakota Counties and one of the original members of the 10-year working group, said homelessness has gotten worse. More people live on the edge of homelessness, and those affected are homeless longer.



Suzie Misel, of the Scott, Carver and Dakota counties Community Action Partnership, pauses for a photo in her Shakopee office. Misel is the Housing and Social Services manager at the CAP Agency and is an original member of the Heading Home Scott-Carver group. In 2010 the group proposed a 10-year plan for ending homelessness. Photo by Meg Britton-Mehlisch

Misel said that in the past 30 days, the CAP Agency had received 95 calls for housing help.

"I think now the challenge goes to employment that's more sustainable, rent people can actually pay and getting more services and agencies out here," Misel said. "But yeah, we didn't solve it.

"We still keep fighting, we're not giving up, we're not done."

-Meg Britton-Mehlisch

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CHASKA — It's been three months since Micaiah Kelley and her family found a transitional shelter in a church basement but a few years since their housing crisis began.

She graduated in 2017 from Job Corps, a residential training and education program where she met her boyfriend, without a home. For the next few years, the couple lived in their car, working odd jobs and couch-hopping with loved ones.



Micaiah Kelley and her daughter pause before stepping into the kitchen provided by the Families Moving Forward program. Kelley and her boyfriend hope to find their own apartment by Christmas.

Photo by Amy Felegy

"(People) think that we're not doing what we need to do or that we're not trying, or we're going down the wrong path," Kelley, 25, said. "But it's just what happens in life.

"Sometimes it doesn't work out for everybody to have a bunch of money or to have a house or a great apartment."

Her breaking point was three months ago, when she realized she couldn't support her now 16-month-old daughter, Octavia. She contacted Child Protection Services and surrendered her in late summer.

"We didn't have food, and she wasn't getting what she needed," Kelley said. "There was a lot of crying that day."

The next morning she called a program called Families Moving Forward to see if they had vacancy. She regained custody of Octavia, and the three moved to the lower level of Shepherd of the Hill Presbyterian Church that day.



Micaiah Kelley, 25, and her 16-month-old daughter play dress-up in the basement of the Shepherd of the Hill Presbyterian Church. "She kind of saved my life," Kelley said. "Today's a good day."

Photo by Amy Felegy

"She's my world," said Kelley, who stays at the shelter with Octavia in place of child care. "I'm glad she's around."

Micaiah Kelley talks homelessness stereotypes



Around a dozen other people at Shepherd of the Hill bus to other churches most nights, leaving as early as 6 a.m. But Kelley said relief might soon be arriving for the trio.

Her boyfriend got a new job a month ago at a school making \$17.85 an hour. The two also applied for subsidized housing this month and could move into a two-bedroom Chaska apartment before Christmas.

"I could call it home," Kelley said.

-Amy Felegy

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SHAKOPEE — Keith Chellsen sat at the entrance of St. Mark's Church with a cart full of donated leftover school lunch food.

An elderly woman walked through the doors and squinted at the bags of food. "French fries and mozzarella sticks?"

"You can take a bag on your way out," Chellsen said.

Chellsen co-founded Shakopee Community Assistance, which gives out food, clothing, hygiene products and diapers for families with limited means, around six years ago. On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, the group partners with Loaves and Fishes for warm meals.

Things were slow this particular Tuesday. A few residents walked in from the cold, nodded towards Chellsen and walked into the cafeteria or towards clothing racks.

On the first Monday of the month, the space becomes far more chaotic. A line hundreds of people long winds down Third Avenue to receive food and other necessities for free. Chellsen said some drive 30 miles.

"And then they have to find the gas money to get here," he said.

He sees Scott County's homelessness every day, but it's more under the radar than in big cities. He helped start Shakopee Community Assistance after retiring from Caterpillar because he was sick of watching organizations formulate 15-year plans to end the problem.

"That's not going to help the single mom out in the cold who has three kids to feed," he said. "And I'm not going to be alive that much longer. I want to do something now."

-Maddie DeBilzan

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JORDAN — It was 5 p.m., and Deb Barker was prepping ingredients in the kitchen of Hope Lutheran Church to feed 14 people, mostly kids.

Barker has cooked meals for Families Moving Forward, a program that temporarily shelters homeless families in local churches, since the southwest chapter was formed in 2014. Volunteers are told to make their favorite meal to keep things diverse. This night it was sliced pork with potatoes, corn and buns with salad and dessert.

As families returned from work, school and the program's day center in Chaska, the quiet church livened up. Soon it was hard to tell volunteers from clients. Barker came out with a bowl of potatoes, telling some boys it's almost time to eat. She identified a Pikachu doll one of them holds but couldn't name the other — Charizard, the boy told her.

The young boy followed Barker as she carried more food from the kitchen, telling her all about Pokemon. She listened.



Deb Barker adds butter to the mashed potatoes Eric Burrill is preparing. The potatoes are part of a meal that will feed 14 homeless individuals, most of them kids, who are staying at Hope Lutheran Church in Jordan for the week.

Photo by Michael Strasburg

At a nearby table, a mother of four settled down with her kids.

One of her sons came over and said a teacher from his school is here to volunteer. He worried she saw him, worried others might find out his family's situation. His mom said it's OK. She said this is a feeling her kids experience often.

"You don't want them to feel less than they are," said the mom, who insisted on anonymity. "The hardest thing is how vulnerable you are and how judgmental people are."

People often don't understand how hardworking, kind individuals can become homeless, she said. In her case, it was a month-long hospitalization bill that used up rent money. The landlord wouldn't accept partial rent or a payment plan. She was evicted and hit with \$7,000 in damage fees.

A pro bono lawyer got the damage fees waived and eviction dismissed. But she still had to find a place to live. Applications for multiple apartments and a house were rejected before she found out the eviction is still on her record. She was trying to get it



Volunteer Angie Newton brings a serving spoon to the Families Helping Families meal table at Hope Lutheran Church in Jordan. The church is sheltering four families for a week. Volunteers prepare dinner and breakfast for them each day.

Photo by Michael Strasburg

expunged. It was something — between raising four kids and looking for housing — she didn't have time for.

After phoning multiple organizations, she eventually heard back from His House Foundation in Chaska, which helped place her in Families Moving Forward.

"It took a lot of channels to get here," she said. "Everyone kept referring us to somebody else."



Volunteers Deb Barker and Angie Newton scoop sliced pork into serving dishes. The two, along with volunteer Eric Burrill, are footing the bill for the evening's meal. When volunteers sign up they're asked to cook a favorite meal, to help keep the food diverse.

Photo by Michael Strasburg

Thanks to the organization, she and her kids had beds and a roof over their heads. But it still wasn't a home. After being moved around week after week and relying on the kindness of strangers, she kept coming back to a feeling of overwhelming vulnerability.

"When you go out or go to work, you have to put on a facade," she said.

-Michael Strasburg

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Over the past few years, government and nonprofit entities have formed a network of assistance for people who are homeless or at risk of it.

Carver County's Community Development Agency serves a primary role serving families and single adults, giving them a single, coordinated-entry access point to other organizations and services.

"It's a very hard system to navigate, and there's a lot of players, and everyone has a different role," said Brenda Lano, the agency's community development manager. "The last few years, the networks have strengthened and our partnerships have grown stronger."

More Information

As of Oct. 30, the Carver County Community Development Agency posted the following numbers for its coordinated entry program. To be eligible for coordinated entry, a household must be sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (like a car or the outdoors), be in shelter, or be couch hopping for a year or more, or four times in the last three years.

- 99 households are currently experiencing homelessness and identify Carver County as their county of residence, meaning they are from Carver County.
- 30 of the 99 households are families made up of 94 people (55 of which are children).
- 69 of the 99 households are adults without children made up of 72 (single adults, couples, or adults with adult children) Combined, this is 166 people experiencing homelessness in Carver County.
- 29 of the 99 households are youth singles, ages 18-24.
- 10 of the 99 households are youth-headed families, ages 18-24
- 39 youth households total.
- 68 of the 99 households are disabled.
- 17 of the 99 were sleeping in places not meant for human habitation — cars, outside, tents, garages, etc.

Source: Carver County CDA

A few of the groups in the network include the Hope House in Chanhassen, which provides shelter for ages 14-19, and Launch Ministry in Chaska, which provides various assistance to young adults. Shepherd of the Hill Presbyterian Church in Chaska is a partner with Families Moving Forward.

There are also liaisons at school districts in the county that meet regularly with Allison Streich at the development agency to discuss issues students and families have regarding housing, food and health care.

Contacts

Carver County CDA: 952-448-7715

Hope House: 612-900-2077; (Text) 612-916-3977

Launch Ministry: 952-856-0195

Agency housing counselor Jack Ashmore will assess clients' situations and the circumstances that pushed them into homelessness.

"We look at all the different avenues and try to find the most expedited way to get them housing possible, and sometimes there's just not a good quick answer," Ashmore said.

-Mark Olson

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SHAKOPEE — Nicole Myhra walked from the Shakopee women's prison to a cab, a cardboard box shaped like a briefcase in one hand, a plastic thermos in the other.

Nearly everything she owned was in that 18-inch box: documents and forms she didn't understand, a few bags of Ramen noodles and a \$100 Visa card to get her from Shakopee to Moorhead, where the Minnesota Department of Corrections arranged a hotel stay for the next 30 days because she had no home.



Nicole Myhra sits in a taxi outside the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, a women's prison. She was released shortly before 8 a.m. on Monday, Nov. 4 after serving time for drug-related crimes.

Photo by Rachel Minske

Myhra was in prison for three months on drug possession charges. Because she's spent her entire life in Fargo, North Dakota, Myhra had scarcely used public transportation and couldn't tell the Twin Cities apart.



Her instructions for how to get to Moorhead were to take a cab to the transit station in Shakopee (\$12), catch a bus from Shakopee to Minneapolis (\$2.50), then hop on a Greyhound bus from Minneapolis to Moorhead (\$37). She had to find an ATM so she could pay for the bus tickets in cash, another \$3.

She'll need an ID to comply with probation and get a job for food and permanent housing. That will cost \$19.25. To get an ID, she needed a birth certificate. That will cost \$26.

Myhra will have 25 cents left after these expenses. She hadn't thought about how or where to find dinner.

Inside the warmth of the bus station, Myhra sifted through the forms and instructions. Scattered and visibly anxious, Myhra crumbled the papers back into the box when asked if she needs to buy her ticket.

"How do I do that?" she asked in a panicky voice that was starting to define her first couple hours of freedom.



As she bought her ticket, the bus she was supposed to catch drove off.

"Why?" she pleaded as she tramped after it. Another bus arrived half an hour later for the Mall of America.

Myhra looked back at the metro station one last time and stepped onto the bus. She hoped she'd never see Shakopee again but knew if she does, it'll be inside the warm confines of the prison with three meals each day and a bed.

Community Stability Program Director Kate Erickson said the Minnesota Department of Corrections is short on resources it needs to ensure those who are incarcerated will have a home after prison.

"How do we expect people to go through that significant transformation when they're in that fight or flight of homelessness?" Erickson said. "So when we say the DOC bridges people, we really do mean that, but I know our systems aren't set up to support it."

There are 4,500 individuals on correctional supervision throughout the state who are homeless or lacking housing stability, according to the department. The department didn't respond to a request for comment.

Staff at Myhra's hotel in Moorhead later said she'd checked in, but a reporter wasn't able to reach her. She doesn't own a cellphone.

-Maddie DeBilzan

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SAVAGE — Patrick Chesla, a social worker M.W. Savage Elementary School, keeps hundreds of winter coats, gloves and snow pants on hand for students. Boots can be harder to find.

Eight or so students are experiencing homelessness at the small elementary school downtown.

A church recently donated Thanksgiving baskets with vouchers for families to have turkey dinners. Chesla offered them to families during conferences and told them he'll take the vouchers to the store and pick up the food — he knows many don't have transportation.

"Social workers in schools wear a lot of different hats," he said.

Around 250 students are identified as homeless throughout the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District, according to an internal spreadsheet that changes daily.



Their numbers are particularly high at a couple of schools. Five percent of students at Vista View Elementary School in Burnsville were homeless last year, according to the Minnesota Department of Education.

The number of homeless students is particularly high there because of a cluster of nearby hotels.

State health officials closed one of the hotels last year because the owners failed to correct safety violations such as broken windows and dangerous mold. Stephanie White, the district's director of special education and liaison to homeless families, said the hotel closing was both good and bad — it wasn't safe, but it was shelter.

Children at M.W. Savage sometimes live at the nearby Quality Inn or Spring Valley Inn. Chesla said there aren't any students living there now, but some have in the past.

He and others use the spreadsheet to ensure homeless students get a free meal and transportation every day. Students' names can be added within minutes once a social worker learns they're homeless.

They then get services required by federal law, including transportation to and from school. Social workers and other administrators secure a place to stay, and then a bus route is rerouted to take the student there. Sometimes they'll hire a cab for high school students.



Photo by Christine Schuster

Homeless children move often, but staying in the same school usually provides the best educational outcomes, White said.

However, other factors might uproot a student from their school if the travel distance to shelter becomes too long or unsafe because of a medical condition. White said she starts considering placing the student in a different school when their transportation time becomes longer than an hour.

Most communication with parents happens over text message. A lot of families have a cellphone with unlimited texting but no call minutes.



Students read and practice writing at M.W. Savage Elementary Nov. 21. School social worker Patrick Chesla said he's currently working with eight students at the school experiencing homelessness. He coordinates transportation, picks up meals and connects parents to other resources. Around 250 students are known to be experiencing homelessness in the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District.

Photo by Christine Schuster

One family has three students. The son at the high school has a working cellphone, so Chesla texts him to set up their ride plans.

-Christine Schuster

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SHAKOPEE — There would be no decisions made, no votes cast, no time set aside for public comment, yet dozens of pastors and churchgoers in red sweaters and jackets packed the Scott County boardroom for a commissioner workshop early Nov. 19.

They were there simply to be there, a show of support for Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative's idea to build 40 to 50 apartments in Shakopee for homeless families in Scott and Carver counties.

Beacon has built hundreds of units around the Twin Cities, but this one would be Beacon's first in the area and first focused on helping children and their parents, said Kevin Walker, Beacon's vice president for housing and shelter. It would give a reachable rung in the ladder from sleeping in cars and on couches to having long-term homes.

Several homeless families stay with local churches in Beacon's Families Moving Forward program until they can find an apartment, but it's become a bottleneck, Walker told the commissioners. There isn't enough open, low-cost housing for those families to move on.

Volunteers at Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran Church in Prior Lake, for example, see the same waiting families cycle from church to church for months, said Dan Poffenberger, senior pastor and one of the meeting's attendees.

"They want these neighbors in Scott County to have a stable future," he said.



Supporters of Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative's plan to build apartments for homeless families in Shakopee chat after a Scott County Board of Commissioners meeting on Nov. 19 to hear about the plan. Several in the crowd were clergy who participate in a Beacon program that shelters homeless families temporarily in churches.

Photo by Dan Holtmeyer

Beacon's building would give tenants case management, rent assistance and services to help with child care and finances and health, Walker told the board. The group has begun discussing the plan with Shakopee staff, has a site in mind and could begin design work in the spring.

It'll need some local public money, about \$1.5 million, to get rolling and secure tax credits and several million more dollars from state and federal agencies, Walker said. He came that morning basically to introduce the plan and broach the topic of a county contribution.

The commissioners seemed open to the idea and advised Walker to keep building the project's support from the public and city government.

"It's really great to see so many of you here and involved and caring about this issue," board Chairwoman Barb Weckman Brekke told the crowd, adding to Walker that she hoped the faith community could stay involved.

"They will be at every public hearing," Walker said to chuckles from the crowd.

Pastor Korla Masters, another Shepherd of the Lake attendee, said she could feel the group's anticipation and excitement, and the commissioners' reactions encouraged her.

"I feel very positive about it," she said afterward.

-Dan Holtmeyer

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SHAKOPEE — Corey Samuels sighed as he walked into the Shakopee Library. He was late for his weekly outreach meeting, still in a striped business shirt and tie from his speech at a Guild Incorporated fundraiser in the Cities.

As he went to his car for a box of blankets, food and toiletries, his client joked that she knows him more for listening to clients experiencing homelessness and mental illness than giving speeches. Samuels said many of his 20 clients in Dakota and Scott counties need a supportive ear.

This client met Samuels at the Scott County Workforce center, knowing she needed help but not knowing where to find it. When Samuel found her in the hallway and asked if he could help, she began to cry.

Samuels is now the woman's outreach manager, an advocate through the maze of state and private programs that can get her stable housing and medical treatment.

Samuels and the woman met this day to check in on her progress getting into a chemical dependency treatment program. Soon after they met, Samuels set her up with a state certified caseworker who confirmed a diagnosis and created a state-supported treatment plan.

Getting into a program or at least on a waiting list has been its own trial, requiring the establishment of the woman's identity and copies of her personal records.

While the woman has been diligent and dedicated, Samuels could see she was increasingly anxious. He commended her work and reminded her it will make getting a job and housing much easier.

But the next week would be the end of the client's 30-day window to start treatment.

"I feel like I'm at a standstill right now," she said. "I can't move and can't take a pace."



Guild Incorporated outreach coordinator Corey Samuels, still dressed from an afternoon fundraiser, sits surrounded by supplies for his clients — people experiencing homelessness with a mental health diagnosis. Samuels holds weekly meetings with his clients, working to get them treatment and housing. People who come to see him often leave with arms full of either food, gloves, or hygiene products.

Photo by Meg Britton-Mehlisch

-Meg Britton-Mehlisch

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Homelessness isn't just someone panhandling on the side of the road or sleeping at a shelter. For many in the Hennepin County suburbs, it's a family staying at a friend or family member's home or sleeping in a car.

"Homelessness is more hidden in the suburbs," said Wendy Geving, the program director at Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners in Plymouth, which works to end homelessness in the area.

There aren't any shelters in the west Hennepin County cities that Interfaith Outreach serves, Geving noted, so people who are experiencing homelessness may sleep in their car or transition in and out of hotels.

"It's most common for unhoused individuals and families to double up, which could look like two to three families living together or one family

sleeping on another family's couch or floor," Geving said.

Of the 10,233 Minnesotans experiencing homelessness who were counted in Wilder Research's 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study, 26% were not in a formal shelter. That's up 62% from 2015, the last time Wilder Research conducted its study. And Wilder said it's impossible to count every person experiencing homelessness because of it.

Homelessness in Hennepin County

In Hennepin County, 4,072 people experiencing homelessness were counted in the 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study by Wilder Research. Of that number:

- 61 were unaccompanied minors (younger than 18).
- 207 were ages 18-21.
- 156 were ages 22-24.
- 1,824 were ages 25-54.
- 500 were 55 and older.
- 1,324 were children with parents.

Source: 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study by Wilder Research.

Geving and Wilder Research say the lack of affordable housing — vacancy rates are low and rent is high — is a major factor in the rise in homelessness; homelessness has gone up 10% in Minnesota since 2015, according to Wilder Research.

Unemployment rates are low, but so are wages, and many of Interfaith's clients are struggling to find a job that pays them enough to meet their basic needs, Geving said. Many of the families Interfaith Outreach serves spend an average of 58% of their income on housing.

Race and decades of discriminatory housing policies play a factor in homelessness in Hennepin County and statewide, Geving and Wilder Research note.

These housing policies resulted in African American family wealth being, on average, 5% of white family wealth, Geving said.

Discriminatory housing policies and other systemic inequities have contributed to people of color being over-represented among the homeless population in Minnesota, Wilder Research found. American Indians and youth who identify as LGBTQ are also over-represented in counts of homelessness.

According to Wilder Research, black people are 5% of the adult population in Minnesota but 37% of the homeless population; American Indians represent 1% of Minnesotans but 12% of the homeless population.

Meanwhile, white people make up 83% of Minnesota and 34% of the homeless population.

-Melissa Turtinen

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EDEN PRAIRIE — Local residents in need line up in PROP Food Shelf's quiet lobby to pick up weekly bags of groceries. A broad network of volunteers bustles behind the scenes to deliver food with efficiency and respect.

Barb Birky, 66, is one of them. The retired teacher has volunteered at PROP since 2004, stocking shelves and packing bags in PROP's crowded storerooms for the clients who wait on the other side of the wall for food that will help them survive the week.



Barb Birky, a volunteer at PROP Food Shelf in Eden Prairie, collects groceries in a shopping cart for a client. She's volunteered at PROP for 16 years.

Photo by Eden Teller

On a drizzly Thursday morning, Birky clipped a list of a waiting person's needs to a grocery cart and rolled between the towering shelves, winding around other volunteers. She snagged rice, chicken, oatmeal and more to pack into the four grocery bags for someone she'd likely never meet.

She spotted a request for hot chocolate and smiled: Birky had noticed the food shelf was out of hot chocolate earlier that week and bought several packs to resupply it.

"It makes you feel good, that we have it," she said. "I've been here so long, and I know what happens at certain times of the year."

Donations tend to rise during winter months and can be scarce in other seasons, Birky said, but as technology changes, the food shelf has more options to stock up.

She'd noticed that there was just a single roll of toilet paper left in the food shelf's stock recently and posted a picture of the lonely roll on PROP's Facebook page with a link to the food shelf's Amazon wish list. In a few days, the shelf was full again.

When she finished filling the bags, Birky rolled the cart onto a scale to weigh its contents. Everything that comes in and out of the food shelf is weighed and tracked by the pound.

At last it was time to deliver the groceries. Birky stepped out into a hallway and wrote a "P" on a small white board, showing the right client that their bags were ready.



While she'd seen homelessness and food insecurity during her days as a business teacher in Minneapolis, Birky's 16 years at PROP have deepened her knowledge.

"A couple incidents, and you might end up here for a couple days or a month," she said.

The food shelf, at 14700 Martin Drive in Eden Prairie, has served Eden Prairie and Chanhassen for over 40 years.

-Eden Teller

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SHAKOPEE — Sitting in a visiting station at the Scott County Jail, a woman gave a hesitant wave, picked up the phone attached to the wall and started talking.

"Do you want the long version or the short version?" she asked.

The woman, who asked to remain anonymous, pulled at the skin on her forehead and shifted her eyes back and forth along the base of the glass as she recounted the last few years: living in subsidized housing, losing it, receiving Supplemental Security Income, losing that, too.

She's had a roommate before, but it triggered her bulimia. Sharing a kitchen space can be triggering, she said. Working at a local pizza joint, the only place in town she could find that would give her a chance, was triggering. Coworkers caught her binging pizza in the bathroom.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, body dysmorphia, anorexia, bulimia and depression are among her mental health issues. She said they all reached a head on a cold day during a Loaves and Fishes community meal in Shakopee.

She tipped over racks of clothing, shattered glass mugs and sucker-punched a volunteer in the face.

It was too cold to sleep outside and, she thought maybe she could get court-committed to a hospital to treat her eating disorders. If that plan didn't work out, she didn't know what she'd do.

She had slept outside under pine trees before. She avoids the parks because she doesn't want to get fined for being there after hours. She stays with family a lot, too. When it's cold, she'll sometimes use her money for a hotel. But her money lasts only a few nights.

Keith Chellsen, who's worked with Loaves and Fishes for years, said the woman's outburst that night was an isolated, uncommon occurrence.

The woman, who spent her adolescence in Shakopee, said she's been in jail three times before, all due to fights over food. At least in jail she could control what she ate. She could avoid the bread they served, but that meant she couldn't exercise as much.

"I would rather sit in jail the rest of my life and be skinny than be fat," she said.

The woman said she wants to get better, she wants treatment for her eating disorders, she wants a job. And she wants stable housing where she can live independently.

"Working and being homeless is hard," she said.

-Rachel Minske

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MINNETONKA — Jessie Billiet is the first person many patrons of ICA food shelf meet. She's one of two case managers at the food shelf and meets daily with up to two dozen people struggling with food insecurity and housing instability in nearby several towns.

Billiet can refer them to Hennepin County resources, food stamps, ResourceWest or MoveForward and provide what little funding ICA has to keep them in their homes and cover utilities.



Dry shampoo, lip balm and deodorant are just a few of the personal item options for the non-permanent housing bags at ICA Food Shelf.

Photo by Frances Stevenson

Most often folks lost their jobs unexpectedly or had a car or medical bill pop up and suddenly can't pay the bills, Billiet said — "You get one crisis, and it snowballs." But they can often avoid homelessness with a small amount of help.

There's been an uptick in the last year, she added.

"Over the summer it spiked a lot; I don't know why," she said. "I think housing, in general, has gotten more expensive. People's income is not going up."

Billiet said people around Minnetonka who lose their homes frequently couch surf or move in with another family, which can cause problems with landlords.

One thing ICA can always do is provide food. They always have emergency bags filled with non-perishable, ready-to-eat foods and other essential hygiene items that anyone can take.

-Frances Stevenson

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JORDAN — A 100-year-old brick building right off the railroad tracks in rural Jordan, once used to bathe and pamper wealthy clients from across the state, has been proposed as the future site of Scott County's only homeless shelter.

This summer the Scott County Health and Human Services Department considered converting the second floor of the county Regional Training Facility into 30 dormitory-style rooms that could be used to house about as many people.

The facility is primarily used to train the county's law enforcement, firefighting, emergency management, public health and public works employees. Sheriff Luke Hennen supported the shelter proposal and said the change wouldn't necessarily hinder law enforcement operations.

"It's definitely a good untapped resource that can get us at least on our feet with dealing with some of our homelessness and housing issues in the community," Hennen said.

The homeless population in both Scott and Carver counties hasn't grown over the past few years, but it's become increasingly visible. The drop in sheltered individuals since 2015, from 84 to 42, leaves 69% of the two counties' homeless people without access to shelter, according to a study by Wilder Research.

The proposal, however, lost traction as local government officials raised concerns about housing people in need in a remote location that shares space with a law enforcement gun range. Scott County officials this month started looking for other options.

There's no homeless shelter for adults in Scott or Carver counties.

-Michael Strasburg



Case Manager Jessie Billiet goes through a non-permanent housing bag, pulling out crackers and Cheerios at the ICA Food Shelf in Minnetonka

Photo by Frances Stevenson

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CHANHASSEN — It was mid-afternoon, and the house was quiet. The four teens at Hope House in Chanhassen were either at school, working or running errands with lead youth worker Chantra Jackson.

The lull gave Hope House program manager Christina McCormick and case worker Tina McCray some time to catch up on emails, calls and paperwork.

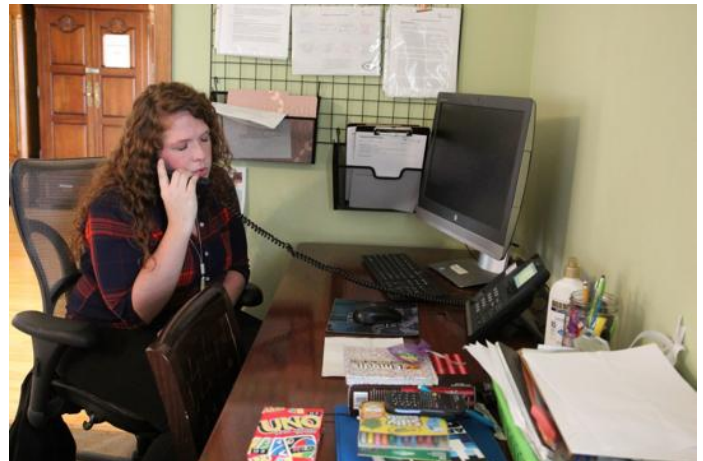
Hope House is a Chanhassen teen shelter sponsored by the Open Hands Foundation. It opened in November 2015 in response to a community study that found three to four teens on average are homeless in Carver County every night due to family crisis or other issues.

Hope House provides gives a bed, meals, counseling and medical attention.

Around 3 p.m., the quiet was over. Jackson returned with two 17-year-old girls. They've spent part of their day grocery shopping and visiting the Chanhassen Library, where the two teenagers checked out a half-dozen DVDs.

Jackson and the girls headed for the kitchen. One of the girls filled a pot with water to make a bowl of Ramen. The other decided on bagels.

Waiting for the water to boil, the girls talked. The first girl has been at Hope House for about a week. She's attending classes at Hennepin Technical College and will leave later that day for a class. The second girl was at Hope House for two weeks. She dropped out of high school but has a job.



Much of case worker Tina McCray's time is spent on the telephone.

Photo by Unsie Zuege

When the Ramen was ready, the teen filled a bowl and took it into the TV room where she queued up a horror movie.

Did you know?

Since opening in November of 2015 in Chanhassen:

- Total in shelter stays: 300+
- Total calls and texts for help: 1,065

- Reasons for stay, in order:
- Household dynamics
- Mental health concerns
- Physical or sexual abuse or neglect
- Drug or alcohol use

Where are they from:

All over the metro area but 70% from these counties:

- Hennepin County
- Carver County
- Scott County

Male/Female:

- 55% female
- 45% male

Budget:

- The annual cost of operating Hope House is \$550,000. Because Westwood Community Church provides the building and general maintenance, the costs are for staffing the shelter 24/7/365, plus some administrative costs for the program from 180 Degrees drive the total expense. Historically, 70% of funding for Hope House has been provided by the community; 25% from the federal government and Hennepin and Carver counties; and 5% from large Twin Cities Foundations (CH Robinson, The Schulze Foundation).

Source: Hope House Foundation

Another 15 minutes, and two more teen girls arrived from school. The volume of chatter and laughter rose. One of the newly arrived girls was anxious to get to the telephone for a job interview.

Three girls talked and looked over some of the DVDs: "The Girl on the Train," "Kill Bill," "The Departed," "The Handmaid's Tale."

"I like the movies you picked," Jackson said. "Stories about strong women."

A noisy discussion ensued. The girl on the phone hung up, exasperated.

"You guys, I was on an interview for a job. You were so loud. Lucky she wasn't mad. Now I've got to fill out stuff on the computer."

The girls apologized.

Jackson came into the kitchen and tells everyone to put on their coats. She bought a wreath and evergreen tips. They're replacing the dead flowers in the planters.

It took a few minutes for the girls to get ready. A couple of them ran upstairs to fix their hair. One complained it's too cold to go outside. Jackson eventually herded the group outside.

-Unsie Zuege

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SHAKOPEE — “Baby Shark” sounded through a small cubicle at the CAP Agency.

A woman had the video playing on repeat for her young son, trying to get him to sit still as she met with housing coordinator Allison Retterath. She kept one eye on a mountain of forms and another on him as he wandered.

Retterath signed off on forms that will help get birth certificates for the woman and her kids and talked about energy assistance programs and when a letter to her landlord about the CAP Agency's rent assistance for her will arrive.



Supportive Housing coordinator Allison Retterath sorts through cold weather donations in the Scott, Carver and Dakota counties Community Action Partnership store room. For now, the storeroom and an empty cubicle in the Shakopee office are mostly filled with cold weather gear: handmade and donated blankets, winter coats, and sleeping mats.

Photo by Meg Britton-Mehlisch

Retterath, her coworkers and her manager, Suzie Misel, are used to filling in for one another — taking an all hands on deck attitude towards helping their clients with housing.

“We’re always at capacity,” Retterath said. “We never really have to wait to get a client because the waiting list is miles long.”

Retterath and her co-workers divide their time between intakes, home visits and calls to landlords.

She said she’s constantly checking sites like Zillow to find openings that meet their grant requirements: They can only place clients in apartments that pass government and state housing inspections and have acceptable rents and willing landlords. Placing someone can be the most difficult part of a case.

“You don’t realize is how many people are inches away from homelessness because rents are so ridiculous,” Retterath said. “Once you become homeless, it’s so much harder to get back on your feet, and we don’t have enough prevention programs.”

That’s why this intake with the mother, who has an apartment ready and waiting, are a cause for celebration no matter the amount of paperwork. They’re an opportunity to get clients stabilized at least for a few months to work out jobs, transportation, food and other concerns.

Even after hearing “Baby Shark” four times, everyone leaves the meeting with a smile.

-Meg Britton-Mehlisch

Correction: An earlier version of this article misnamed Beacon's church shelter program, Families Moving Forward, in which Scott County churches participate.

Donate to the cause

Southwest News Media is collecting donations to benefit the Community Action Partnership of Carver, Scott and Dakota Counties. Between Monday, Nov. 22 and Friday, Dec. 20, a number of locations throughout the region will serve as collection sites for CAP's emergency services supplies.

Needed items include: canned food items with pop tabs, deodorant, razors, toothpaste, small bottles of mouthwash, toilet paper, shaving cream (small bottles), hand wipes, laundry detergent (small bottles), hand soap, dish soap, tissues, lib balm and full bottles of shampoo and conditioner.