

Interfaith network works on long-term solution to homelessness

By: Velvet Spicer February 26, 2018

On any given day in Rochester there are 600 people who don't know where they will be sleeping that night. Or the next night. Or the night after that.

They are the invisibles. Not the homeless men and women you see huddled together, warming their hands over a fire. You don't see the invisible 600 because they bounce from place to place—one night staying with grandma, the next night sleeping on a cousin's couch, staying with an abusive boyfriend or sleeping in a beat-up car.

And experts say for every homeless adult there are two homeless children.

The stereotypical family is a mom with two kids. If you're doing 600 people per night, how many are children? Well, over half are children," said the Rev. Rod Frohman, board chairman and co-founder of Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network, or RAIHN. "That's gut-wrenching for me. And it's also angering for me.

"I do not know why in the hell this community, which has so many resources, can't have 600 homeless families per night in its mitt," Frohman added. "Why does this community have the highest child poverty rate in a city of its size in America? It's immoral. It's angering."

Family homelessness is nothing new. The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that a staggering 2.5 million children are now homeless each year in America, while Green Doors, a Texas-based nonprofit that strives to help end homelessness, contends that homeless families constitute more than one-third of the total U.S. homeless population.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that nearly 190,000 people in families with children are homeless nationwide on any given night, and nearly 17,000 of those homeless people are unsheltered. New York State ranked 49th for its extent of child homelessness on the HUD 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, with an estimated 258,000 homeless children statewide last year.

HUD reported that the number of homeless people in families with children counted on a single night declined by 5 percent from 2016 to 2017, as did the number of homeless family households. Over the last 10 years, the number of homeless people in families dropped by 21 percent nationwide.

But in New York state, that number increased by nearly 51 percent over the last decade. And nearly 30 percent of all homeless families nationwide were living in New York State.

Providing shelter

RAIHN, an affiliate of Family Promise, began battling this phenomenon on April 26, 2004, when the organization took in its first homeless family. But its roots can be traced to 1986, when Family Promise began its first interfaith hospitality network in New Jersey.

Karen Olson, Family Promise's founder, had been delivering sandwiches to homeless people in New York City. When she learned that families in her community in New Jersey were affected by homelessness she connected people in need with those who could help them. Existing community resources could provide shelter, meals and housing. Volunteers could use their skills and compassion to help their homeless neighbors find employment, reconnect with society and restore their dignity.

When Olson approached the religious community, congregations offered hospitality space within their buildings. The YMCA provided showers and a family day center. A car dealer discounted a van to drive the homeless families from day centers to churches that would house them at night.

In Rochester, a similar scenario took place in 2000, when Frohman took part in a conversation with Nancy Frank, who was coordinator of Mission & Outreach at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Frank asked Frohman if he had ever heard of the National Interfaith Hospitality Network, as Family Promise was then known. As it turned out, Frohman's father-in-law, a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, was involved with the program.

"The rest, as they say, is history," Frohman said. "It went from there. We got a hold of our colleague across the street at Asbury Methodist, Margie Mayson, and then the three of us met at Hogan's (Hideaway) and sat down and said, what do we need to do to make this happen?"

It took the trio roughly four years to put together the program, including finding congregations willing and able to participate, as well as building a board of directors, raising funds and purchasing a van to transport homeless families.

"Since (Family Promise) had done this 100 times already they had codified it, produced a couple of manuals, kind of a paint-by-numbers," Frohman recalled. "So we really benefited from the mistakes of other congregations."

An interfaith hospitality network works by enlisting churches to house homeless families at night, while during the day the children go to school and mom and dad work, or they spend their time at a day center operated by the network.

"We work with 42 different congregations in Monroe County; 13 of them are hosts," said Kim Hunt-Uzelac, RAIHN's network director. "Being a host means families go there at 5 o'clock to spend the night."

Family Promise told RAIHN not to open the program until the organization had enlisted at least 10 congregations.

"You do not want to start this kind of thing and then flop," Frohman recalled Family Promise saying. "Fortunately we were successful, and off we went."

Congregations were enthusiastic about the program, Frohman said, because it was something that was "bite-sized."

"Which means that a given congregation doesn't have to be overwhelmed by homeless people in their building all the time," he explained.

Families spend one week at a time—from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. each day—at a host congregation, and on Sunday they are transferred from that congregation to the next. Because of the rotating schedule, each of the 13 congregations hosts families roughly four times a year. The remaining congregations serve as volunteers to help set up for the families, cook meals for them or play games with the families, Hunt-Uzelac said.

During evening hours, RAIHN also offers training and life skill classes that range from financial literacy and budgeting to resume building and parenting.

RAIHN can serve up to five families at a time at its Webster Avenue facility, where each family has a locked room where they can relax, store their belongings or play with their children during the day. The facility also features a laundry room, a computer lab, a fenced courtyard for the kids and a common room that has a kitchen, living room and dining area.

"We try to provide everything here to make it cozy and hospitable," Hunt-Uzelac said, noting that about 60 percent of the families RAIHN shelters have jobs, so some days at the center are busier than others.

RAIHN's staff of four and more than 1,600 volunteers provide personalized case management, transportation assistance and other daily needs such as food, clothing, toiletries and diapers. Each person that comes into the network signs a covenant of both behavior and development.

"The behavior covenant is that they're not going to be disruptive and use drugs, etc.," Frohman explained. "But the development covenant—it's a personal plan. We ask each person to put together a 90-day plan. In 30 days or so it's possible for that plan to get underway, and then we help them get an apartment, get stable, and our aftercare coordinator works with these families to help them stay on task."

To help fund the agency, RAIHN holds fundraisers, such as its annual Car City Carnival, which is April 28 this year. Car City gives the community an opportunity to learn about family homelessness in a meaningful, hands-on way by attending

the event and sleeping overnight in their cars or the gym. Similar to the idea of a walk-a-thon, participants in Car City raise a registration fee plus pledges to benefit RAIHN.

RAIHN has been in its Webster Avenue location since last August, when the organization outgrew its original building on Meigs Street. The landlords of the Webster Avenue facility, Gianinny Bros. LLC, are siblings who are Frohman's former Sunday School kids. They are providing the facility at under market rate, Frohman said.

"It's a loss for them, but it's part of their faith commitment, their compassion to the community," he added.

The new, 4,000-square-foot location also features apartments above the day center, which allows RAIHN to temporarily house families until they can find a more permanent residence.

"With this stable of apartments available to us we can increase our annual capacity by about 25 percent," Frohman said. "That's the cutting edge for us right now."

Poverty and outcomes

Families can become homeless for a number of reasons, but most of the time it is because they have been evicted, Hunt-Uzelac said. Generally, that's a result of one or both parents losing their jobs or being saddled with high medical bills.

"We always have a few families every year coming straight from their cars. Because 60 percent are working, the car's often the last thing that they will let go of because they need it to get to work," she explained.

Hunt-Uzelac recalled a single mother who was living in her car because she had had an accident and was hospitalized for some time. As a result, she lost her job and fell behind on rent.

"When you're living in poverty and you're living on the edge of financial crisis at any moment, something like that can set you back," she said. "You miss rent for a month and you can be taken to court and evicted just like that."

For many of RAIHN's families, this is their first time in a shelter.

"It's a blip in their lives," Hunt-Uzelac said. "They've always lived in poverty and they probably will continue to live in poverty, but for the most part they're able to handle their finances in such a way that they're able to pay rent every month."

Hunt-Uzelac said Rochester has a poverty problem that isn't getting any better, which makes the demand for services high.

"We have a very big problem in Rochester with the entrenched poverty in the city," she said. "It's often hidden for families. A lot of the families that call us had been living doubled up for some time, so they're living with other family members and they can no longer do that."

RAIHN has permanently removed 360 families from homelessness in its 14 years.

"But the challenge is that we have 300 families knock on our door and we have to say there's no room at the inn," Frohman said. "And wow, that stabs."

The importance of RAIHN is twofold, Frohman said.

"One is its symbolic importance because our capacity isn't all that large. We're handling 30 to 35 families a year and there are 600 individuals out there, maybe 300 families a night on the street, invisible out there someplace," he said. "We turn away 300 families a year because we do not have the capacity for them. So there's a symbolic benefit."

The second impact RAIHN has is in the area of outcomes.

"With good sociological and social work principles applied, and behavior modification principles applied, homeless families can turn their own lives around and we can stop toxic charity," Frohman said, explaining that Monroe County gives the homeless short-term housing vouchers, but they end up back on the street after the vouchers expire.

Toxic charity, Frohman said, means a person's dependence is perpetuated.

"RAIHN operates on the basis of producing good outcomes for our people. We are not perpetuating poverty. We are not temporarily removing them from the street," Frohman added. "We're permanently removing them from the street. And when they leave the program they have a skill-set that they didn't have, or that they had forgot about and have relearned, so they're self-sufficient people in the community, being productive citizens in the life of the community."

vspicer@bridgetowermedia.com / 585-653-4021