

## NORTH JERSEY

# Passaic County seeks answers on up-county homelessness

Conference to be held Monday at community college

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To really combat homelessness in Passaic County, some may have to think beyond the box.

The homeless in upper Passaic County, for the most part, do not fit the stereotype of their city counterparts, advocates say.

They don't take shelter in a cardboard box. So suburbia may look like an oasis from housing problems.

But those taking up the fight for the homeless say theirs is a plight that demands action even here.

It is an issue drawing attention as the Passaic County Interagency Council on Homelessness hosts an Oct. 23 meeting at Passaic County Community College in Wanaque to help formulate a 10-year plan to stop homelessness throughout the county. The council, which is made up of nonprofit, government and business representatives, hopes to release its plan in December.

"There is nothing more basic than the need for security and safety that is epitomized by the house... Without permanent housing, people have a hard time moving on emotionally. Their first concern is their home," said Robert Parker, executive director of NewBridge Services, a nonprofit social

service agency with West Milford and Pequannock offices.

He puts the number at about 1,500 of individuals who are homeless or at risk of being homeless in a year's time in Passaic County, according to figures from the Passaic County Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Describing the emotional toll homelessness can take, Parker tells of people bouncing from home to home among relatives, and children never leaving the nest because of a lack of affordable homes. In one standard two-room setting, he said, a couple of children sleep in the kitchen while their mom nods off in the living room. Such settings put a strain on family life.

"You're in an area where the rents keep rising," said Karin Westdyk, program director at Strengthen Our Sisters which runs women's shelters in West Milford and Wanaque. Though SOS strives to help women regain independence, Westdyk said the high cost of living is a real obstacle.

"Affordable housing is fiction," she said. "There is nothing more disheartening than someone who has made those strides and cannot find housing."

As the Passaic County Interagency Council on Homelessness keeps progressing toward its goal, the Wanaque meeting will be a chance to gather up-county voices and show that it is reaching beyond the cities.

"The Passaic County freeholders

recognize that homelessness is an issue that affects the entire county, not just the urban areas. And we are excited to hold this meeting up-county in order to accommodate individuals from all over and receive everyone's feedback, input and participation in the planning process," said Freeholder Terry Duffy, a resident of up-county West Milford. "I thank everyone for their cooperation."

Ringwood Mayor Joanne Atlas, who plans to attend the Oct. 23 meeting, has seen the housing struggles of the working poor in portions of her up-county town and its environs.

"I think when you know about 16 people living in a house, I think that's evidence of a housing problem," said Atlas. "I know families who are in trouble about this."

Unlike homelessness in a typical sense, she said, "It's not so visible. It's also not a lifestyle choice - that an individual would prefer to live on the streets," as can be the case in the cities.

Yet it's a problem that erodes many facets of life - from school performance to nutrition, said Atlas, who has seen the plight up close as an advocate for tenant rights for many years with the New Jersey Tenants Organization.

Over the years, the state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) has pressured municipalities to plan for a certain number of low- to moderate-income homes.

Yet the affordable housing problem remains.

"It (COAH) tries but it gets subverted all the time," Atlas said, "because developers use COAH as a bludgeon against towns" to build large-scale projects with just a sliver of affordable units. Sometimes the projects are so big they drive up the population-based COAH quotas even further, she said.

One solution, she said, might be funding opportunities for towns to pursue their own affordable-housing, such as senior citizen accommodations to keep older ones from having to leave town over costs.

NewBridge Services has decided not to wait but to develop affordable housing on its own, said Parker. A full-time employee at NewBridge has been entrusted with the job of creating 100 affordable homes scattered throughout Morris and Passaic counties, he said. Twenty-five of these units are to be ready by June.

To illustrate why many get in housing trouble, he reports that a minimum wage worker in Passaic County would have to work 116 hours of a 168-hour week to afford a one-bedroom apartment at 30 percent of his or her total income.

Those invited to speak at the Oct. 23 forum, beginning at 2 p.m., are Freeholder Director Elease Evans and Sam Miller of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness. For more information call contact sharid@passaiccountynj.org.

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