

Face of Homelessness Changing in Stamford

By Nora Naughton

STAMFORD — Home for the holidays.

It's a concept that exists outside the Perry Como Christmas song. For too many in the Stamford area, another year is passing without a permanent place to live — let alone celebrate the holidays. Others are learning to cope without a home of their own for the first time.

As chronic homelessness across the state declined this year, Stamford is in a unique position. Data from the [Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness](#) shows homelessness in the Stamford-Greenwich area eked up 1 percent, driven by a 35 percent jump in street homeless — or those without access to shelter.



The people filling the beds at the city's two homeless shelters — [Inspirica and Pacific House](#) — are not all part of one demographic, though. Both facilities address ongoing factors that can lead to homelessness, including substance abuse and debilitating mental illness, but it is becoming clear there is a much larger population to serve.

A salary of as much as \$50,000 may qualify a two-person family for affordable housing in Stamford, the fifth most-expensive housing market in the country. Then, there's the wage gap. Average median income for a two-person family is \$105,400, but the state minimum wage is less than \$10 an hour.

It's those daunting economic contrasts that are forcing even fully employed members of the community into homelessness.

Jason Shaplen, CEO of Inspirica, which runs the largest shelter in Fairfield County, call this new population "economic homelessness."

"Far and away, homelessness today is pure economic homelessness," Shaplen said. "Almost 30 percent of the people who came to us last year had a job. ... The soaring cost of living and stagnant wages have created a very volatile situation here."

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Inspirica has responded with individualized programs for clients, who are matched with their own team of experts that provide services ranging from career counseling to budgeting lessons. For families with children, specialized education centers and after-school programs give parents a chance to re-enter the workforce without worrying about the expense of child care.

Winter's approach

At Pacific House, a bright spot has executive director [Rafael Pagan](#) feeling optimistic.

“During winter months when (temperatures) go below 33 degrees, we typically would go beyond capacity, and could get to up over 100 people in our emergency shelter,” Pagan said in a recent interview. “In the last year, though, we saw a trend that we were not maxing out in the winter months, staying in the 80s.”

That trend falls in line with CCEH's data, showing that emergency-shelter populations have declined by 9 percent in the Stamford-Greenwich area. People can stay at emergency shelters up to 90 days. The emergency shelter at Pacific House has an 82-person capacity, and is capable of handling up to 100 people on “overflow” nights. It is most busy during the cold winter months, Pagan said.

While the emergency shelter is at capacity less often, Pagan said there is still a pressing need for transitional housing. A new 16-unit affordable housing development on Spruce Street will help provide transitional housing to the growing economic homeless population.

“Given the cost of living in Stamford, we need to give (clients) a way out of the shelter,” he said during a tour of the Spruce Street complex this fall. “With a place like this, they have permanent housing while we help them get on their way.”

Changing face

Economic homelessness is posing new challenges for local shelters, but other populations have seen some improvement, as evidenced by some of the empty beds at Pacific House's emergency shelter.

An end to chronic homelessness is also within striking distance, and for the first time this year, veteran homelessness was at a “functional zero,” according to CCEH.

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These are all positive signs, but homelessness remains a serious issue in Stamford, Shaplen said. “We are barely containing this problem,” he said. “The face of homelessness is changing, not disappearing.”

Inspirica will prepare its no-questions-asked overnight warming shelter starting Dec. 11 for nights when temperatures drop below freezing. But Shaplen said seasons are now less of a factor to homelessness.

“There is no more seasonality to homelessness,” Shaplen said in an interview this fall before the cold weather hit. “We are at capacity year-round, and we have a waiting list.”

To read the article online, please visit: <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/Face-of-homelessness-changing-in-Stamford-10689415.php>

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