

COLD: Often Unseen, Homelessness Persists

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But he is hardly alone.

On Long Island alone at the beginning of this year, more than 3,000 people were homeless, according to the Long Island Coalition for the Homeless, the slim majority being single men and women over the age of 24. Approximately 1,400 of these homeless people were children.

Of the more than 3,000, nearly 2,600 spent some time in emergency shelters, which provide only a temporary overnight place to rest, eat and get help. Almost 600 were in transitional homes, which is typically temporary housing set up to transition residents into permanent, affordable housing. More than 60 people did not have any shelter at all, according to the coalition.

Without A Home

Maureen's Haven, an organization in Riverhead that provides support and shelter for the homeless, provided shelter for 337 adults from the East End in its overnight shelter program in its 2013-14 season, which ran from November 1 to March 31 at churches and synagogues in Southampton, East Hampton, Riverhead and Southold townships. About 49 to 57 people on average took advantage of a Maureen's Haven's shelter each night during the season—typically about 12 women and 38 men.

Tracey Lutz, the organization's executive director, said that by Thanksgiving, Maureen's has an average of three new people every day coming in for help. About 7 to 10 percent are veterans, and the majority are male, Ms. Lutz said, because women often have other options. Women are more likely to find a place to rest their head on people's couches, and there are shelters that cater to women since they are more likely to be victims of domestic violence.

Ms. Lutz said women face a "whole host" of threats when homeless, including rape, sexual assault and homicide.

People as young as 18 have shown up at Maureen's Haven, and in many cases, it's because they've aged out of foster care, she said.

"Those people, you really want to work quickly with them to get

off the street, because if they stay too long, they end up getting into trouble," Ms. Lutz said.

On The Streets

Out of view, many people who face homelessness and can't get or don't seek help take refuge in the woods. All along Route 58 in Riverhead, and on Flanders Road, Montauk Highway in East Hampton, and County Road 39 in Southampton, people pitch tents, build makeshift shelters and store mattresses.

Ms. Lutz said it was mind-boggling to see firsthand the little communities that have been set up along the Long Island Rail Road tracks.

"I spoke to the people that lay the tracks and do line work, and they said, 'It's unbelievable what we see,'" she said. Mr. Link, who has stayed in the woods himself, said he is familiar with such encampments but never stayed in one himself. "I was all over the woods, in spots that people never walk in, but, you know, it's scary," he said.

He said he knows of a location in the woods in Wainscott where someone built a "livable shelter," and people who knew about it would drop donated food on top of the garbage can near the road.

If not in the woods, some homeless people trespass to find shelter in churches, abandoned or vacant homes or buildings, too.

From time to time, police officers come across or get calls about trespassers who are homeless. East Hampton Town Police Captain Chris Anderson said each case is handled differently, but not much can be done if an individual doesn't want help.

"When there's police interaction, right away their radar goes up," he said. "When there is an authority figure, the assumption is that there's a problem. It's always a fine line and juggling act for officers to try and broach the subject in a non-adversarial way."

He said aside from making referrals or acting when someone's mental health or well-being is on the line, there's not a lot the department can do. "There's no solution in a can or ready-made solution to deal with the problem," he said. "It's a chosen way of life for some of these people. Many of them prefer to live that way, kind of anonymously."

Mr. Link, like many others, lived in his own vehicle—a silver pickup truck—for a while before it was impounded. He would park at baseball fields and other municipal parking lots, but eventually he was told by police not to park there. At the end of the truck's life, a fire blew out the truck's wiring. He had been lighting candles inside the cab to keep warm.

"It was trouble for me anyway," he said.

What Drives Them

It's often said that people who are homeless choose that life, and while it may be true for some, most people have no choice, either because of their finances or a series of tragedies and other unforeseen troubles.

At a recent Maureen's Haven emergency shelter at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Hampton Bays, Richard, who didn't provide his last name, said he had been living paycheck to paycheck and then lost his job. Not being able to find any full-time work, he said, he couldn't afford housing. So now he jumps from one shelter to another.

He said Suffolk County's Department of Social Services housing is very iffy, too—20 guys can live in one house, with four to five men to one bedroom. The department's emergency housing isn't always available either. "If there's no bed, you're out of luck," he said.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, foreclosure, poverty, eroding work opportunities, fewer public benefits and a lack of affordable housing can all contribute to homelessness.

Ms. Lutz said the number of single adults who are homeless is growing, and she attributes that to the continued lack of affordable housing.

A man in his 70s, who had been living on Social Security and his savings, as well as some money he earned by teaching piano lessons, came to Maureen's Haven for help, Ms. Lutz said. When the economy took a dip and his savings ran out, he could no longer afford an apartment and had nowhere to go.

At an East End Disabilities Group mental health forum last week, Edna Steck, the former East Hampton Town director of human services, said there



A woman is served dinner at the Maureen's Haven emergency shelter at St. Mary's Church in Hampton Bays one recent Friday night. SHAYE WEAVER

needs to be a greater focus on educating the community about what to look for and what the resources are when a person really needs mental health help.

"We have homeless people in town who also have mental illness," she said. "Short of being arrested for trespassing because they sleep in someone's house or in their cars, there's no way of reaching them or engaging them in some way. A lot of them resist getting help, those who don't take their medication."

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, approximately 16 percent of the nation's single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness.

Mr. Link is bipolar and admits that he didn't take his medications for a while. In his bouts of mania, an extreme emotional high, he had a lot of energy and felt as if being homeless made him happy. He said once he went without sleep for five days.

"I had no responsibility but to try to take care of myself," he said. "That's why I liked it. Amazingly enough, even though I lived a rough life, I started to become so happy. That was part of it—mental illness. My mania's energy was off the books."

Originally, he decided to leave home after a severe depression washed over him, and he felt his family, his wife and son would be better off without him.

"It wasn't anybody's fault about

what happened," he said.

He held a series of jobs in his life, he said, including as a caretaker for Paul Simon, later at a union in the city, as a caretaker with Catholic Home Care, and as an electrician for East Hampton Town for seven years.

He said he is on his medication now and is improving. He currently lives at the Community Housing Innovation shelter in Riverhead. "Even though it sounds bad, I'm in a better place than I used to be," he said.

A Better Place

On November 14, the Maureen's Haven's emergency shelter at St. Mary's Episcopal Church took in 20 people, who, after unloading from a Maureen's Haven van, filed into the church's center and signed in, some smiling as they were greeted and others looking as if they were just relieved to be there and get some food.

Just before dinner was served, the Reverend Eric Rey of the Hampton Bays Assembly of God Church, which was playing host for the night with 35 volunteers, said a prayer, asking God to bless the people and be there in their midst.

Rev. Rey said that night Maureen's Haven and the outreach the 60 churches and synagogues do each winter is about showing "everybody grace in a practical way." He said it's the little things that matter the most.

That night, the volunteers

served the homeless not only by providing dinner, which included pulled pork, but by giving free haircuts and manicures, providing entertainment with singing, and providing shoes, coats and other clothing for free. After dinner, too, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous circles and Bible studies were held for those who needed it.

"They're very safe here," said Denise Foley, the Assembly of God's church director, who coordinates the outreach. "There's a lot of need, and you don't see it. This is my heart."

Maureen's Haven works with its clients to find housing and employment as well so one day they won't need to rely on the organization for help.

Mr. Link said last year he went to three Maureen's Haven shelters and that he is now waiting for a more permanent place. He finally got help last year after Thanksgiving.

"I don't want to say that this is coming up to the end, but I'm coming to my goal to be placed permanently in Mastic-Shirley," he said about his time in transitional housing. "I plan to go out and look for a job and rely on public transportation."

As for his family, he still has hopes to put together the broken pieces he left behind when he left home. But he knows it's going to be an uphill battle.

"I want to be a good father," he said. "But I don't know if I'll ever be."

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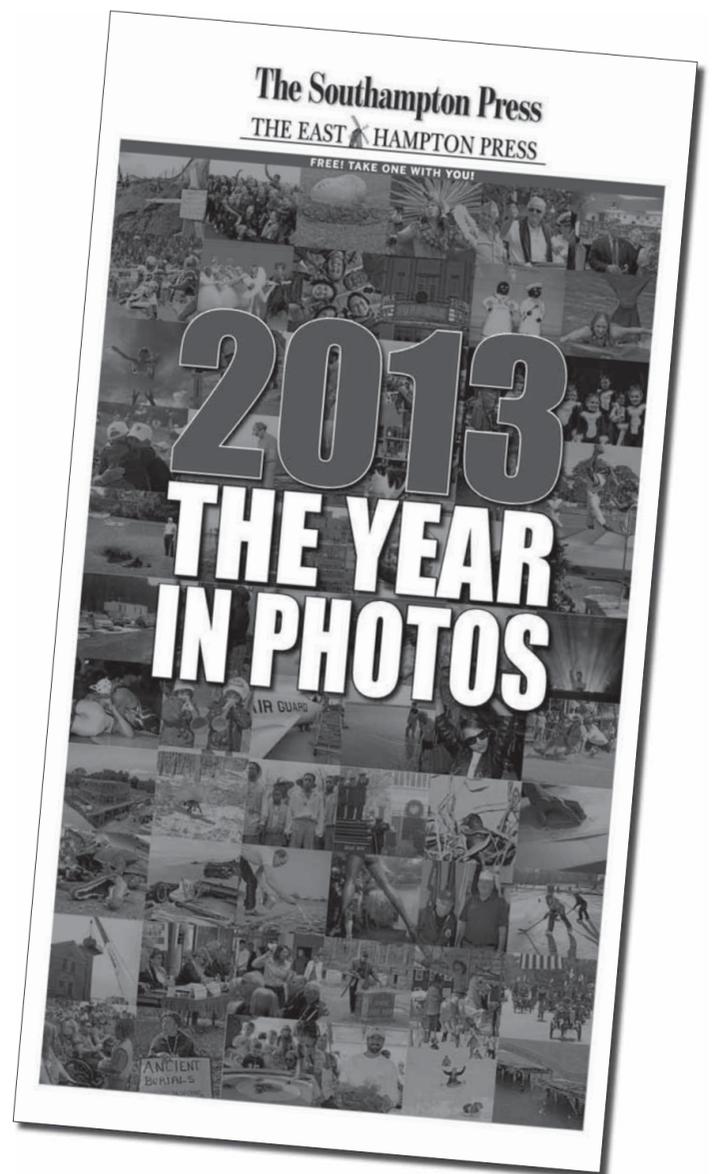
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