

Scarce services for the homeless

Bryan Betts, Alamogordo 6:57 a.m. MT June 23, 2015



(Photo: Bryan Betts — Daily News)

Editors note: This is the final installment of a two part series on Alamogordo's homelessness.

Without an overnight shelter, homelessness in Alamogordo can mean living in a desert of services as much as in an environment lacking water and vegetation.

The [Center of Protective Environment](http://www.copedv.org/) (<http://www.copedv.org/>) operates what research suggests is the only shelter in Alamogordo where individuals and families displaced from their home can live temporarily, though executive director Kay Gomolok said funding is limited to those who have been victims of domestic violence.

For those who don't qualify for assistance, Gomolok and other community leaders said they will sometimes arrange for a Z-Trans bus trip to Las Cruces, where up to 50 homeless people can pitch their tents on city property designated for that purpose. The [Mesilla Valley Community of Hope](http://www.mvcommunityofhope.org/) (<http://www.mvcommunityofhope.org/>) oversees the tent city, known as [Camp Hope](https://hopevillagelascruces.wordpress.com/) (<https://hopevillagelascruces.wordpress.com/>), and provides social services for residents on its campus, according to the nonprofit organization's website.

But advocates like Susan Payne of [Love Inc.](http://www.loveincotero.org/) (<http://www.loveincotero.org/>) said that sending individuals in need of help to other cities isn't a solution to the problem, particularly when it means relocating longtime Alamogordo residents who find themselves temporarily homeless.

For now though the drive along U.S. Highway 70 east across the Tularosa Basin and past the white gypsum sand dunes still takes one into a region of the state where resources for the homeless run thin.

Hank Hughes, executive director of the [New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness](http://nmceh.org/) (<http://nmceh.org/>), said the organization and its partner agencies have sought to expand services since forming in 2000, though their efforts haven't enjoyed equal success throughout the state.

"We have pretty good services elsewhere, but there's a definite lack anywhere east of Las Cruces especially," he said, noting cities like Gallup, Farmington, Las Vegas and Clovis where the coalition works to help people transition into permanent housing. "Really the only part of the state we're not heavily involved in is the southeastern part."

Interviews with the homeless, their advocates and city leaders revealed a range of opinions on the viability of expanding housing and shelter for the homeless in Alamogordo, though many feel the community should be doing more.

"It seems to me that we ought to be taking care of our own, instead of sending them elsewhere," Gomolok said, while adding that it would be difficult to manage and fund a facility. "Whether we have the capacity in this community to do that, I don't know."

Making Plans

Alamogordo's current lack of an overnight shelter belies the fact that several community advocates have been or are currently involved with efforts to provide a temporary place for the homeless to stay.

Love Inc. Executive Director Susan Payne said that a couple years ago she tried unsuccessfully to get permission from the city commission to use a city-owned building for a transitional living center similar to the [Mesilla Valley Community of Hope](http://www.mvcommunityofhope.org/) (<http://www.mvcommunityofhope.org/>). She said she envisioned it as a place where people in need of a break could stay temporarily and access resources that would help them into a more stable situation.

Mayor Susie Galea said she supported the plan but felt the city commission as a whole viewed homelessness in much the same way as predatory lending — as a problem not serious enough to require action from the city.

Commissioner Nadia Sikes said she thought the city would more than likely support a good plan that came out of the community but that the city's current funding capabilities don't leave the commission in the position to initiate anything.

Payne said she knows a pastor and his wife who hope to host homeless individuals at a place in La Luz. She said she also remains open to working with the city commission.

Janet Quick of the [Otero County Hunger Coalition](http://www.oterohunger.org/) (<http://www.oterohunger.org/>) said the organization, which prepares free meals at local churches throughout the week, is looking for a permanent building where the hungry and homeless could eat dinner, do their laundry and take showers.

One project currently underway aims to convert a former school administration building at 1222 Indiana Ave. into a facility that would help people "overcome destructive dependencies" like drug addiction or chronic homelessness, according to the man spearheading the effort.

Jeff Jowdry said the vision for the facility developed out of what he called an "encounter with God" a few years ago that has helped him recover from a struggle with alcoholism that destroyed his life as a car salesman and left him wanting to die. He said he believes true recovery doesn't happen without God but stressed that the facility won't be a church, expressing a disinterest in the rules many people associate with religion.

According to Jowdry's plans, the facility would expect those receiving assistance to engage in some form of work. Towards that end he said he's been working on securing contracts and forming a sole proprietorship that would enable the organization, named the Foundation for Change, to create jobs and hire people.

"That is the whole purpose of this," he said, "to be productive."

The more than 10,000 square foot space Jowdry acquired about three months ago still requires extensive renovations, though he's already moved his office to the facility. His plan is to fill one of the buildings on the property with cots that will provide 30 or more people a place to sleep, though he said the facility won't specifically be a homeless shelter.

"The demand is incredible," he said, stating his desire to achieve nonprofit status sometime this year. "The moment that we open the doors, I believe we'll be full before the week's over."

Addressing causes

In an academic paper published in 2010, three sociologists — Barrett Lee, Kimberly Tyler and James Wright — review a range of scholarly work on the subject of homelessness, including the question of its causes.

They write in "[The New Homelessness Revisited](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1129&context=sociologyfacpub)" (<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1129&context=sociologyfacpub>) that many homeless report having endured abuse, neglect, housing instability and poverty at a young age, showing that "the path for many begins in childhood." They also list mental disorders and the death of a spouse as factors that place adults at risk.

But the three coauthors question the commonplace idea that people choose to become homeless, writing that "the choice will be made only when the hardship of street and shelter life is judged more attractive than remaining in a dysfunctional and potentially dangerous" home.

Hank Hughes used a similar logic to explain why the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness has for more than 10 years promoted an approach known as "housing first," which focuses on making long-term housing available to the homeless.

"I think some people will tell you that they prefer to be homeless because they don't like any of the options given to them," he said. "But usually with the housing first, when that's offered, housing with no conditions, a lot more people are interested in the service."

Hughes gave the example of homeless alcoholics who find it hard to stay sober and thus avoid shelters that don't allow alcohol. The housing first approach, he said, has shown that placing people in long-term housing gives them a more stable setting in which they can address an alcohol problem, mental health condition or other issue in their life.

"That's why we encourage communities to pursue housing if they can as opposed to shelters, because shelters are a temporary solution," he said. "They're certainly necessary, but without housing, there's never an end to the homelessness."

Hughes said housing those most in need, like the chronic homeless living on the streets, also frees up resources for those who don't need quite as much help. The challenge is making apartments affordable for homeless individuals living off Social Security or disability benefits, which might involve building new structures, using available housing and subsidizing rent and utilities.

Hughes said he'd love to see a group start a nonprofit organization in Alamogordo that focused on providing housing and could receive funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. He said there are also resources available for homeless veterans, whom the NMCEH has made a goal of tracking down and housing by the end of 2015.

Help Available

Rev. Kris King said the House of Prayer mission, 601 Delaware Ave., began helping the homeless when a hungry homeless man showed up at a meeting about 17 years ago and members gave him a can of stew and some crackers.

Since then, she said, the ministry has grown to where it now serves a free breakfast and lunch every weekday to anyone living outside, in a vehicle or in an abandoned house. The facility also allows the homeless to do laundry, take a shower, watch television and use a computer without charge during the day.

King said a homeless man ran a small night shelter for the House of Prayer until he died earlier this year. The man who prepares the twice-daily meals was once an alcoholic living in a house without utilities. King said she was herself addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs when she arrived in Alamogordo decades ago, crediting the experience with drawing her to help those down on their luck.

One day last month, donated tents, sleeping bags and sleeping pads available for those who need them piled up on shelves in a corner of King's office. Another room was filled with an assortment of packaged foods and hygiene products.

About six men made their way to the House of Prayer for lunch, including a man who had been sleeping in a city park and was brought over by a La Frontera employee. The men waited outside in a shaded courtyard or relaxed in the television room until the cook began serving beef brisket sandwiches with corn and baked beans, all food donated to the mission.

King said Jimbo, one of the men living in a wooden shelter across the tracks, comes by most days. The House of Prayer plans to find him a house and get him disability payments, which she said would be hard to do for someone who still drinks.

"They've got no money, and they're alcoholic. Nobody, nobody wants them, society's throwaways," she said. "We just don't give up on them."

Some of the same people who ate lunch at the House of Prayer showed up for a Hunger Coalition dinner on a Wednesday night a few weeks later.

Hunger Coalition councilwoman Janet Quick said the organization began serving meals five years ago and now prepares meals five days a week, serving about 135 plates at the Wednesday meals at Our Savior Lutheran Church.

Quick said most of those who come aren't homeless but enjoy the opportunity to socialize over a meal. Others are homeless, she said, though those in the community might not be aware of which of the diners are living in a car or rotating between friends' couches.

"It's amazing the blinders we have," she said. "And we need people to just open their eyes and look and ask questions."

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