

Homelessness is harsher in the winter

BY ROBERTA BAKER
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Editor's note: Part of this story was cut off when it appeared in Saturday's paper. It is reprinted here in its entirety.

LACONIA — The Christmas tree at Isaiah 61 Cafe contains nearly 275 handmade ornaments printed with names — one for each homeless person who has visited the soup kitchen in the last three years. On the floor wicker baskets are filled with items for surviving the winter cold: donated socks, gloves and scarves. Sleeping bags, tents and coats are stored upstairs.

"They don't even think you want to know their name," said Dawn Longval, co-founder and owner of the homey soup kitchen on New Salem Street, which is set up like a club or living room, as a friendly and human-feeling place. It includes a space to do laundry, shower, and cook, serve and eat meals.

"When you remember their name," Longval said, "it means a lot."

Homelessness can easily become an impersonal and anonymous issue lost in a tangle of problems that are daunting to solve: substance abuse, joblessness, low wages, mental illness and a lack of affordable housing.

Communities, including Laconia, take steps to address homelessness piecemeal, and solutions take time, money, public education, community buy-in and business support, according to housing and homeless advocates statewide.

In Laconia, the persistent problem of homelessness comes to the fore every winter, then seems to melt into the background each spring, said Leon-

ard Campbell, coordinator of parish and community services at Catholic Charities in Laconia. But it's a perpetual elephant in the room.

This season, Laconia is tasked with finding the right place to create a cold weather emergency shelter, one that will also take in homeless people who are living with substance abuse issues.

"The city's doing all it can do at this point," said Mayor Andrew Hosmer, who created the Mayor's Homelessness Task Force, which meets monthly to consider solutions. "I think we need to have a cold weather shelter online as soon as possible."

Stakeholders from the city and social services are evaluating potential locations and ways to pay for the shelter, but no site has been chosen yet, Hosmer said.

Among the tender monuments keeping this mission at the forefront — and underscoring its importance — are the portraits on the walls at Isaiah 61 Café, including photographs of five regular visitors — soup kitchen "friends" who have died in last three years, some from substance misuse, most while living outside, Longval said. Another wall celebrates couples who have met and married here, or celebrated their anniversaries at the cafe. No one is nameless or faceless.

"We do celebrations of life for people who have passed away," a small number locally out of the 40 to 50 homeless people who die each year statewide, Longval said. "One man passed away during the first quarantine" phase of COVID, she said. "He was living in his van."

On the wall is a portrait of a man with a young daughter. He frequented the café for a year and a half before dying outside of a drug overdose, Longval said. In another photograph, a woman who struggled with alcohol abuse and helped the homeless from her mobile home eventually succumbed



Mark Emery of Laconia and Dawn Longval of Sanborton stand in front of the tree at the Isaiah 61 Cafe in Laconia, which provides a range of services for people who need them. (Roberta Baker/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

to liver disease. One regular visitor named Michael died when someone sold him bath salts instead of the narcotic he was using. "They found him outside in the cemetery," Longval said. He spent a week on a breathing machine before he passed away.

Then there's a picture of a smiling man in his early 30s wearing a stylish black jacket, who had conquered substance misuse for two years, then died because he was allergic to a drug prescribed for a medical issue. "It was a snowstorm and there was nobody around," Longval said. "Teddy was a trooper. He was so good and clean for two years." The portraits keep memories of friends alive.

An equally powerful reminder is the list of names read aloud on December 21 at a vigil held for homeless people who have perished in New Hampshire over the last year. Laconia's service, which has taken place at Veterans Park, didn't happen this year because of planning and COVID concerns, said Campbell, an organizer of the event.

But the list itself is a sobering reminder — partly because of the number of young people on it who have died homeless in the last 12 months. They include Jade Miller, who grew up in Plymouth and passed away in August in Manchester at age 33.

"She enjoyed working as a waitress and hostess and she tried her hand as a carpenter's helper, learning to lay bricks and paint homes. In addition, she had a green thumb, enjoying plants and gardening. She loved God, children and animals, especially her two cats Niko and Starlet. She enjoyed crafts such as embroidery and sewing. Everyone looked forward to her homemade chocolates at Christmas time. Jade was a member of St. Mark's

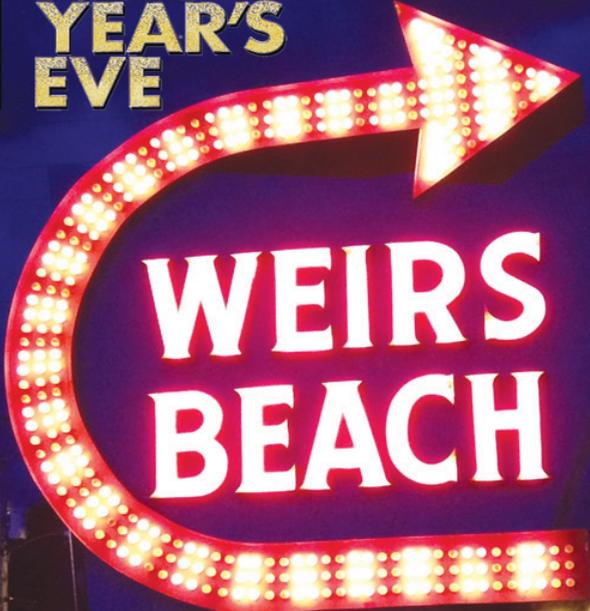


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Episcopal Church of Ashland,” her tribute said.

Robert Gebo, who was from Tilton, died in April at age 46. “Rob loved the Patriots and he and his mother would both yell at the TV when they scored. He loved camping, being outside...and having coffee with his grandmother. Rob would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it...He was one of the workers who replaced lines when the towers went down on 9-11 in New York City,” his tribute said.

Joseph Z, came from Florida, where he had retired, to be closer to family and grandchildren in New Hampshire. “After having a disagreement with a family member, Joe found himself on the street corner with his suitcase, in a snowstorm” before he could find a place to stay. Police brought him to the Hundred Nights Shelter, where he “enjoyed helping as much as he could. He always had a joke and a smile – if he thought another guest needed comforting he provided it.” After several months he found housing, but continued to help at the shelter. He was eventually reunited with his family and grandchildren before dying peacefully in August, according to his memorial statement.

Also on the list was Mary Rittacco, who died outside in Concord last month at age 70, after “she had expressed concerns about making it through another winter.” Her body was discovered in Bicentennial Square. Juan Batista passed away unexpectedly last month at age 26. “Juan enjoyed listening to music and playing basketball. He was free-spirited and funny,” his tribute said.

The list also contained many first names without descriptions.

Gov. Chris Sununu last week proclaimed Dec. 21 “Homeless Memorial Day,” and announced the creation of the New Hampshire Council on Housing Stability, which will seek to address the broader issues underlying homelessness.

“Individuals and families experiencing homelessness and housing instability often have many conditions impacting their situation, and it is imperative to ensure access to services that address all of their needs,” the proclamation stated. and it’s crucial to ensure access to services and shelter options.

A sense of belonging

In Laconia, the benefits provided by Isaiah 61 Café, a Christian mission of the Longval family, include community, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging and worth – which have been harder to come by during COVID. The café is a place where people meet and look forward to meeting friends in similar circumstances – and to helping out with cleaning, sorting donated goods and putting out coffee for peers, Longval said.

Their personal stories testify to a range of needs – including transitional and supportive housing for those with mental illness and/or substance addictions, and for affordable apartments that are within reach of people with meager incomes, with erratic or low-paid employment, or who have spent time in jail. At the top of the list is a place to go in cold weather.

“They’ve stayed outside all night and then they can come here to be someplace warm,” said Mark Emery of Laconia, a UPS driver who volunteers at Isaiah 61 Café. “I wish we didn’t have to have this situation that people are homeless.”

Misunderstanding and stigmas continue as barricades to sympathy and action, said Campbell, who favors the creation of a homeless resource center in Laconia that would serve people throughout the Lakes Region. Even creating a low-barrier emer-

gency shelter has its detractors. The classic community reaction – “not in my backyard” – remains an obstacle, Campbell said.

Increasing understanding is critical. “Sometimes people live paycheck to paycheck, or are one paycheck away from being homeless,” Emery said. “It could be any of us at any time. It could be from an illness or overall poor health,” or from a job loss that segues into long-term unemployment, or from COVID-19, which interrupted the livelihood of many Granite Staters, including many who felt financially before.

Snow, ice spotlight the need

During the recent storm that dropped a record snowfall in the Lakes Region and Concord, “one woman’s tent collapsed, but everyone made it through,” Longval said. “We give out handwarmers daily.”

The café currently serves food to roughly 50 homeless people daily, down from about 75 before COVID. But “it seems like it’s growing more each day,” Longval said. “People get their lunches then don’t have anywhere to sit.” The number served so far in 2020 has been a “huge increase” over two years ago, she said.

She estimates that as many as 200 people are living outside in the Laconia area, or are without permanent shelter going into winter. “I can’t imagine what they go through every night. They come in and they’re so thankful,” said Longval, whose six children help in different ways at the café.

“My two babies pray all the time, and say, ‘Mommy, we need to pray for all your friends outside.’”

Longval said the cold weather emergency shelter is “a desperate need,” especially because evictions have increased because of nonpayment of rent

during COVID, and because people who have been exposed to the virus can’t go to work.

Low wages make it difficult to afford a local apartment. “Even with two jobs, they’re just making ends meet,” Emery said.

As far as available, realistically-priced rentals, “there’s not a lot out there, especially in the Lakes Region, and the waiting list for housing is years, and that’s a challenge, too,” said Longval, who is also a landlord.

She believes the greatest obstacle to building a cold weather emergency shelter may be lingering fear. “There’s a lot of fear, even before COVID. Even in my Christian circle, there’s a fear of people they don’t know how to help,” because they struggle with addiction and mental illness, and the joblessness and homelessness that creates.

“Some people live in their vehicles and also need them for transportation,” said Emery.

“Sometimes when (the weather) is really bad, we let them stay in the lobby” at the police department, Laconia Police Chief Matt Canfield said. “We don’t have a lot of options for them. A cold weather emergency shelter – there’s a very big and direct need for it in the city,” he said.

During a winter weather advisory, the Laconia Fire Department allows the Salvation Army’s Carey House to expand capacity by four beds to house a total of 44 guests at once, said Carey House director Paula Corriveau.

It may not sound like much, but it helps.

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The Sunshine Project is underwritten by grants from the Endowment for Health, New Hampshire’s largest health foundation, and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. Roberta Baker can be reached by email at Roberta@laconiadailysun.com

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