Confronting Homelessness

How Homelessness Affects Many in our Schools and Community and What We Can Do About It

EMILY ROONEY / KNIGHT LIFE

Since 1933 the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission has been a place of hope and restoration for those who are homeless. It is the largest mission for the homeless in Southwest Michigan, offering numerous services to help people in many different areas.

Emily Rooney
Editor-in-chief

"I never thought I would be homeless, that's for sure," explained Kathy Hill.

Hill is a part of the Family Hope Discipleship Program at the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission where she is working to get her life back on track. Hill came to the Gospel Mission in September of last year after finding herself homeless as a result of alcohol abuse. Just like many other people who find themselves homeless, Hill had never imagined that she would one day find herself out on the streets.

Yet homelessness strikes many people unawares every day right here in Kalamazoo. The effects of homelessness are felt not only by adults in our community, but by children and teenagers in our schools as well.

It is difficult to define homelessness because it is a situation that often results from many complicated issues. A person is considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. The definition of homeless extends to any person whose primary residence is a temporary place, any place not meant for regular sleeping accommodation by humans, or a supervised temporary shelter.

Although homelessness sometimes results from poor choices, many times it affects people who have no control over the situation such as family members or children.

Karen J. Kacynski, Communications Officer for Housing Resources Inc. also acknowledges that homelessness is a complicated issue and indicates that children and teenagers are often hit the hardest by homelessness.

"Loss of a job, an illness or disability that prevents work, the poor Michigan economy and a shortage of affordable housing all play a role. Unfortunately, children and teenagers are helpless victims in these situations. They are powerless to prevent these things from happening to their parents or those they are depending on to provide for them," said Kacynski.

Focusing and being successful in school becomes exceptionally difficult when a student does not know where or if they will eat that night, or if they will have a safe place to sleep. Teacher and Peace Jam advisor Sveri May speaks to the added difficulties that homeless students are forced to contend with every day.

"Sometimes getting to school is what they do that day," said May. "It's warm here [at school], they can get food, and they know there is a network here to help them. School is a place for them to escape the harsh realities they are forced to endure for no fault of their own," described May.

Many of us cannot imagine having to deal with being homeless on top of completing homework, working an after school job, and other activities. But for 470 students in the Kalamazoo Public School district this is a reality they must face every day. According to Jon Behrens, Homeless Liaison Specialist for all KRESA schools, at Loy Norrix alone, 34 students are currently homeless, which is about 7.2% of the student population.

Behrens works with homeless students and their families to make sure they know what their rights are and also to provide transportation, tutoring, school supplies, and other services. Behrens believes that when a student is homeless, their ability to function in school and in general is highly affected.

"There is a lot of stress in children's lives who are homeless for many reasons. There are just so many variables. Homelessness impacts students in different ways, [As a result of homelessness] some student's grades can suffer, and some can struggle with self-esteem [may be affected]. Their priorities certainly may be different, they are just trying to survive," said Behrens.

Additionally, when a student is homeless they often feel left out, or different from other students. Kacynski believes that these feelings of isolation or hopelessness also affect a student's ability to function not only in school, but in their everyday lives.

"Unfortunately, there is a negative stigma associated with being homeless. A student may feel ashamed or different from other kids. The feeling of being helpless or worrying about the situation may carry over into the ability to do homework or keep up in school," said Kacynski.

> "We have to change our perception [toward homeless people]. ..We need to embrace people in their times of need."
>
> -Terri Thomas, Executive Servant of the Deacons Conference

Although confronting the issue of homelessness in our community, and in our schools may seem like an overwhelming task, there are many institutions and programs already in place to help the homeless, and also many ways that community members and students can help. Many institutions serve meals daily, and provide places to sleep for people who are in need. The Gospel Mission is one of these institutions, providing three meals everyday of the year and a warm place to sleep at night. The Gospel Mission also offers many programs that allow people the chance to get their lives back on track such as the Family Hope Discipleship Program for women and families, or the New Life Discipleship Program for Men. These programs help people get themselves together and learn skills that will allow them to find work. Pastor Michael L. Brown, Executive Director of the Gospel Mission described the work in training program offered by the Gospel Mission;

"The majority of the homeless population is people who want to find work and get help. We have work in training programs where people are taught work skills such as retail work skills, or maintenance skills. A lot of times the main thing we teach is how important it is to get to work on time, how you should dress at work and how to follow instructions. We reacquaint them with proper job etiquette," said Brown.

Another organization working to help people who are in need of assistance is the Kalamazoo Deacons Conference located on the North Side of town. Executive Servant Terri Thomas of the Deacons Conference is fully committed to helping people in need. She is able to relate to people who are going through hard times because she struggled with drug and alcohol abuse for about nine years of her life. She puts her whole self into serving those who come to the Deacon's Conference and believes that everyone is able to help out in some way.

"You don't have to be a professional [to help] all you have to have is a heart for people. The more volunteers we have, the more people we can serve," said Thomas.

One of the main ways to help is by volunteering your time to organizations that serve the homeless. An easy way for students at Loy Norrix to help is by donating food to the food drive because some of the food goes directly to families at our school who are in need.

May reinforces the importance of recognizing that homelessness is not a situation that anybody wants to find themselves in, and that we should all do everything we can to help those who find themselves in this situation.

"Nobody wants to be homeless. These are just regular people trying to live their lives, but for some unfortunate reason they find themselves in a bad spot and end up homeless. There is always somebody that everyone can help, and by lending your volunteer time to places doing these things [helping the homeless] is a wonderful way to combat it," said May.

Thomas also recognizes that homeless people should be treated like everyone else and stresses the importance of changing our perception toward homeless people.

"We have to change our perception [toward homeless people]. They fear how they will be judged, and sometimes their pride gets in the way of asking for help. We need to embrace people in their times of need," Thomas emphasized.

Behrens also stresses the importance of increasing awareness about homelessness and of being sensitive and understanding toward those who are homeless.

"Awareness is also important. We should try to be more sensitive and empathetic to students who are homeless," said Behrens.

Homelessness is a complicated issue and unfortunately it may always exist to some extent. Pastor Michael Brown recognizes that homelessness is not an issue that is just going to disappear completely, but he is confident that through the efforts of people, we can confront, and make a difference in the lives of many who are homeless.

"I don't believe there is an end-all solution to homelessness…We need to hold homeless people accountable to do as much as they are capable of to change their own situation," said Brown.

For anyone interested in helping people who are homeless or simply in need of help, Terri Thomas stresses the fact that "this is a people business. You have to care about people… They need to feel encouraged, they need to feel hope."

Brown also believes in the power of helping others. He insists that "the greatest investment you will make will be an investment in people." If we all take the time to make an investment in people, perhaps the issue of homelessness in our schools and community can be diminished, and possibly resolved one day.

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Mark Wespinter, a volunteer at the Gospel Mission helps prepare dinner on November 12th.

How You Can Help:

- Serve a meal or do a project at one of the local centers that assist the homeless.
- Call Donna Pearce at the Gospel Mission for ideas and guidance on projects you can do and ways to help: 345-2974 ext. 226.
- Participate in the Walk for Warmth on Saturday, February 23, 2008. Visit http://www.caascm.org/walkforwarmth.htm for more information.
- Donate food to the food drive or local food pantries.
- Educate others; make them aware of homelessness and how we can help.
- Be understanding and treat those who are homeless the same way you would people who have a home.
- Collect clothing and personal items and donate them to places like the Deacons Conference and other centers that help the homeless.
- Urge government officials to support building more affordable housing.

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Suerina Franklin, a volunteer at the Gospel Mission, stirs the soup that was to be served for dinner.

By the Numbers:

- Out of 11, 816 students in the Kalamazoo Public Schools District, 470 are actively homeless. There are currently 112 families and 213 active students who are "doubled up" which means that more than one family is living together.
- Out of the 1,360 students enrolled at Loy Norrix, 34 students are actively homeless, which is about 7.2% of the school population.
- The Gospel Mission serves around 570 meals a day.
- Because much of the food is donated by local businesses, the Gospel Mission spends an average of 11 cents per person to provide meals.
- 737 people per month take refuge in an area shelter.
- According to the Kalamazoo Gazette, 35 % of homeless are children, the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.

Community Resources:

Kalamazoo Deacons Conference
1010 N. Westnedge Ave.
344-7333

Gryphon Place
1104 S. Westnedge Ave.
381-1510
24-hour crisis help line: 381-HELP (381-4357)

Kalamazoo Gospel Mission
448 North Burdick St.
345-2974

Title I Parent Office
Office of Homeless Services
714 S. Westnedge
Room 203
337-0063

Housing Resources Inc.
345 North Burdick St.
382-0287