



November 27, 2023

To the West Michigan community:

We present this message to our community with a sense of great concern and urgency as our region's coldest winter months are fast approaching.

Economic hardships, the loss of supportive resources from COVID, and a shortage of affordable housing have combined to worsen the already difficult situation facing men, women, youth, and families experiencing homelessness in West Michigan. The shifting landscape is presenting an increasingly dire situation for people living on the street and an overwhelming demand for the non-profit service agencies that provide compassionate care, meals, services, and shelter to those in need.

Homelessness is on the rise, and for many of these individuals, it is the first time they have experienced homelessness in their lives. According to the Point in Time count, there were 723 individuals experiencing homelessness in Kent County in 2018. In 2023, that number sharply increased to 1,239 individuals experiencing homelessness. Based on trends and current bed capacity in our community, an estimated 100 to 300 people could be without access to shelter services on the coldest winter nights.

Making matters even more challenging is that just like other employers, some non-profit agencies are facing a worker shortage and a funding shortfall. Adding temporary shelter beds this winter, as has happened in the past, is a significant challenge because there are simply not enough workers to ensure a safe environment for overflow guests. **What's more, the funding needed to provide additional staffing and a location for overflow shelter space is not presently available. Therefore, non-profits simply cannot meet the demand.**

We are committed to providing compassionate support to as many of our neighbors in need as possible, while maintaining a safe environment for all. However, when the population growth of individuals experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity in our community far exceeds the limited amount of shelter space, we are faced with difficult decisions and risk loss of life.

Our collective community efforts to address the homelessness crisis must include both near and long-term solutions. Of immediate concern is the urgent need to find shelter workers and shelter bed space. At the same time, we remain focused on initiatives to increase affordable housing, create more access to mental health resources, strengthen workforce development and employment opportunities, and more.

The rising issue of homelessness is one facing our entire country, and an issue that is of paramount importance in West Michigan. Collaborative work between agencies, governmental partners, and community leaders is happening to create a long-term cohesive strategy. As non-profits, we are doing great work, but we can do even more with increased funding, more staff, and more shelter rooms to meet this growing need. With your help, we can save lives this winter by protecting unhoused individuals, youth, children, and families from extreme, life-threatening temperatures. To learn more or join us in our efforts to combat homelessness, visit us at our websites below.

We remain resolute in our commitment to serve those in need in our community, and we stand ready to continue partnering with our community leaders in taking steps toward finding a sustainable solution that benefits the entire region.

Sincerely,

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