

It's the season to house people experiencing homelessness

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By Cullen Ryan Special to the Press Herald

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When you house a person who is homeless, you watch that person's life change for the better. In Maine, we try to do this as efficiently as possible, focusing our limited resources on people who are really stuck and who most need our help. Two people whom our organization helped house are good examples. Prior to being housed, one of them had been homeless for 32 years, and the other for 30 years. It is hard to comprehend a history of homelessness that's that long.

Because of adequate support, they have been stable in their homes since 2013. Each is doing well, and one might not guess that they'd ever been homeless in their lives, let alone homeless for decades. Yet decades it was – they bounced through shelters, slept outside, stayed in places unfit for human habitation, were frequent subjects of police and rescue interventions and were fixtures in emergency rooms. They were unhappy, and the world around them was not better for it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Now that they are housed, there is overarching stability for these two people and others like them – few, if any, crises, no more emergencies, improved quality of life and noticeably more happiness. And it is much less expensive for all of us.

What changed? Instead of focusing our limited resources inside the revolving door of homeless shelters, the community collaboratively targeted equal efforts outside of shelters – on getting people housed, and keeping them housed. Housing, quite frankly, is a huge leg up – it injects stability into chaos and solves many of the issues. Outreach support does the rest. This is not to say that this is easy; it is not. But we know exactly what it takes, and we want to get there for each person who is homeless.

The important word here is “community.” It takes a community to end homelessness. When I mentioned limited resources earlier, I meant that. Shelters barely make it, services are a patchwork at best and we have insufficient affordable housing.

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Maine has not created enough housing for homeless populations, and what we do have is full. We developed dedicated housing when we had resources, but resources are being made scarce.

Because there is a big gap in affordable housing in much of our state, we rely on private landlords to help fill voids, but we need more to partner with us. Many landlords are not aware that our state's most vulnerable homeless populations come with full support teams, on-time rent payments through direct deposit or centralized payment networks and a 95 percent success rate, the [Maine Long Term Stayers Initiative](#) has found – better than the eviction rates in many regions and far better than the rate resulting from individual pre-screening efforts. Landlords are renting to a team of professionals as well as to a person experiencing homelessness.

This win-win business strategy for landlords also has sociocultural benefits. Landlords who are willing to see for themselves are giving each person a second chance, investing in their communities and getting great results. They are an important part of the equation of ending homelessness.

People experiencing the emergency of homelessness don't have the luxury of waiting years to obtain safe, stable, affordable housing. Having people languish in homelessness benefits no one – it is extremely detrimental to their health and well-being, and it is inordinately expensive for the rest of the community. People who are homeless need access to housing.

Critical to successful community housing placements are support services, and the social services community is able and eager to help. In Maine, we have designed services to support people, from the emergency of homelessness into housing. Not only have rates of chronic homelessness dropped precipitously since the advent of this "[housing first](#)" approach, pioneering landlords have seen this formula work.

It makes societal and economic sense to invest in people, including those most vulnerable among us. Doing so creates vibrant, inclusive communities in which everyone can thrive. We know exactly how to end homelessness, but it takes an umbrella of common allies working together toward the same end to do so. Landlords are an imperative part of this umbrella. We need more landlords to step up to the plate, invest in their community and become part of the solution to ending homelessness. Doing so will pay dividends for all of us.

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