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Chippewa, Eau Claire counties see rise in homelessness

By Chris Vetter Leader-Telegram staff

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Brianne Berres

CHIPPEWA FALLS — In the past 15 months, the number of homeless people seeking assistance at the L.E. Phillips Career Development Center outreach office in Chippewa Falls has quadrupled, said director Jennifer Barrett.



Overall, at least 150 unique individuals sought assistance in Chippewa County agencies that work with the homeless in a report from April, which is the highest number recorded this year, Barrett said.

"There are a lot of unmet needs," Barrett said. "We're also seeing a shortage of affordable housing. Our vacancy rate is really low."

The L.E. Phillips Career Development Center is at 508 N. Bridge St. in downtown Chippewa Falls. The agency sent out a press release Monday, alerting the public of the growing homeless problems. Barrett said she is asking people to donate their old tents for the homeless to use this summer because "I think there won't be other options."

"They can't find landlords who can't forgive a past eviction, or a conviction," she said.

Brianne Berres, Sojourner House director, said homelessness also appears to be on the rise in Eau Claire.

"We're definitely seeing some new faces at Sojourner House," Berres said. "Our numbers are increasing."

On any given night, there are 50 to 60 homeless people staying at the facility, Berres said. Over the course of a month, roughly 115 to 120 different people will stay a night.

Berres didn't have an estimate for the entire Eau Claire County homeless population, but she noted a lot of people are living unsheltered, and others might be spending nights in their car.



Barrett said the homeless are fairly hidden in Chippewa County, so the general public isn't aware of the growing problem.

Chippewa Falls hasn't had a homeless shelter since Harmony House closed in February 2014. There are nearly a dozen "tiny homes" homeless shelters at churches in Chippewa Falls and Lake Hallie. A tiny home is mobile, built on a trailer, featuring a chemical toilet, heater, chair, table and bed. Most of the units already completed and in use are 8 by 12 feet or 8 by 15 feet in size. Each house costs between \$5,000 and \$7,000 to complete, between construction and furnishings.

However, Barrett said the tiny homes have been filled to capacity in recent months, including a mother living in one with four children. One tiny home just became vacant, and Barrett is already processing applications to fill it.

"There is no (running) water in a tiny home, and that is a turnoff for some folks," she said.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also creating new challenges leading to the increase in homelessness, she added. They have been able to provide one-month rent assistance checks to those who haven't been able to work. They also have seen an increase in the request for hotel vouchers.

"It's a scary, unprecedented time in the world right now," she said. "Fortunately, the hotels are still willing to work with us."

Berres agreed that COVID-19 has brought on unexpected challenges. Many public drinking fountains or bathrooms in parks simply haven't opened this year.



"Water is going to be a high need for unsheltered people," she said.

COVID-19 also has impacted Sojourner House's volunteer base, as many of those volunteers are older and in high-risk categories, so they aren't out and helping, she said.

"And our biggest need is donations," Berres said.

Barrett is concerned because she anticipates emergency funding will run out at the end of June.

"We've had to turn people away because of lack of funding," Barrett said. "The moratorium on evictions is ending."

Barrett said there is definitely a need for a large, public housing complex in Chippewa County.

One positive is Agnes' Table, which has provided free meals in downtown Chippewa Falls since its inception in 2004, now offers food five days a week, she said. It recently moved from Trinity United Methodist Church to the Legacy Community Center building at 26 W. Grand Ave.

"We've seen a huge increase in the need for food," Barrett said. "Our food pantries are going strong."

Barrett said one option would be to try and get some of the homeless Chippewa County residents into programs in Eau Claire County, but that is a challenge because there isn't public transportation to Eau Claire, and it also means removing those residents from their community support structure in Chippewa Falls.

