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EDITOR'S PICK SPECIAL REPORT

Rising homelessness should be wake-up call to Wisconsin leaders, advocates say

From the Homeless in Madison | A City Challenged series

DEAN MOSIMAN and DOUG ERICKSON | Wisconsin State Journal 17 min ago



Decades of inadequate leadership and insufficient direct funding from the state have weakened the fight against rising homelessness in Wisconsin.

Advocates and service providers say state officials must be more engaged to address an often hidden plight that shatters lives and creates significant costs for social services, schools, health care and law enforcement.

There's no precise way to measure homelessness, but a State Journal review of data make clear that its scope is broad — affecting infants to seniors and all demographics.



By one estimate, perhaps 20,000 people are homeless in Wisconsin on any given night. One count shows the ranks of homeless single adults growing by nearly 25 percent since 2007. Another has the number of homeless children more than tripling since 2003.

State officials say Wisconsin spends tens of millions of dollars on homelessness. But the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness and local officials and providers disagree, contending that most of the money isn't targeted directly at the issue. The state essentially has delivered no new direct funding for two decades, with the sum long stuck at about \$3.3 million, the coalition says.

That sum is more than Iowa's \$1 million in direct funding, but it's dwarfed by the \$44.3 million in direct funding in Minnesota — seen as a gold standard of investment and approach in the Midwest — according to a coalition analysis from mid-2015 updated by the State Journal. In far more populous Illinois, the figure is at \$49.5 million.

Wisconsin officials insist the state is doing a lot, and that funding only appears comparatively low because resources that can benefit the homeless aren't all specifically labeled that way and flow through multiple agencies.

The coalition, forged just 18 months ago, insists more must be done. This week it is releasing "A Roadmap to Ending Homelessness in Wisconsin" with specific policy and budget recommendations.

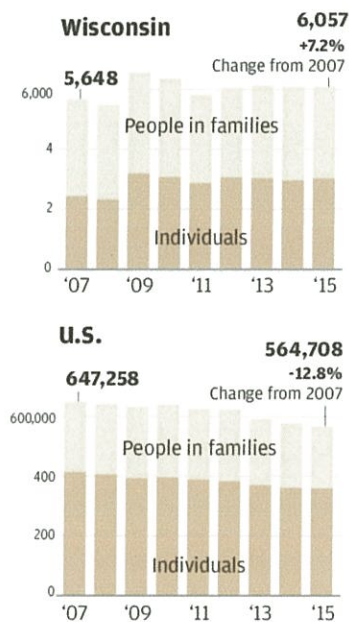
At a minimum, the state should triple its dedicated funding to \$10 million, said coalition executive director Joseph Volk, who said Wisconsin has fallen behind others in addressing homelessness in part because service providers haven't advocated at the Capitol for a long time.

As the coalition presses its case, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, a Republican, is publicly making homelessness a priority and fact-finding in anticipation of offering ideas in the fall.

Kleefisch and her staff, who in recent months have visited housing and program sites and had multiple discussions with Volk, aren't endorsing coalition recommendations or promising new funds — at least not yet. In a recent interview about possible initiatives, several times she promised, "Stay tuned."

Number of homeless people

Over recent years the number of homeless people in Wisconsin is trending up, while the nation is seeing a decline.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development State Journal

In a follow-up email, her office added: “We have an ongoing conversation with Joe around these recommendations and will consider all of them in the broader context of the governor’s budget and upcoming legislative session when we reach that point.”

For now, Gov. Scott Walker is noncommittal about the coalition’s recommendations.

“The governor supports the lieutenant governor’s leadership in combating homelessness,” Walker spokesman Tom Evenson said. “Addressing homelessness presents unique challenges, but the governor’s agenda of moving people into roles where they can have true independence through work can assist in these efforts. He plans to continue such initiatives, such as broader welfare reform including the drug testing and rehabilitation programs.”

State Capitol homeless

Members of Madison’s homeless population, Bradley Marvin, 23, left, and Justin Kingan, 29, prepare to settle in for the night on Capitol Square in late April. State officials say Wisconsin delivers funding to address homelessness through multiple agencies, but advocates and service providers say state government must do far more to prevent and end homelessness.

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JOHN HART – State Journal

'The giant in the room'

In Madison and Dane County, the state isn’t seen as a catalyst for action.

“I do not see any leadership from the state on this,” said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi, who served in the Legislature for six years. “We do what we can, but the state is the giant in the room.”

The state’s direct funding, according to Volk, delivers \$1.8 million for homelessness prevention, \$1.4 million for emergency shelters and transitional housing, \$50,000 for runaway youth and \$20,000 for supportive and permanent housing.

In contrast, the Minnesota Legislature added roughly \$13.7 million for a total \$88.7 million in direct funding in 2016-17, he said.

The comparisons aren’t fair, Kleefisch maintained.

“As we scan across the country and determine what is homelessness programming and homelessness funding and what is not, it manages to slip out of that label because it wasn’t on that line item,” she said. “I think we’ve got to be cautious in saying who is spending this allotment of money and who is not.”

At the State Journal’s request, the state Department of Administration provided a detailed outline of tens of millions of dollars spent across an array of agencies including the departments of Corrections, Veterans Affairs and Workforce Development.

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But the state's figures, Volk said, include large amounts from federal sources and spending on programs such as veterans nursing homes that are at best peripheral to homelessness. These are sums that aren't included in other states' funding summaries, he said.

Still, Volk applauds Kleefisch's attention to the issue. "They're putting in a huge amount of effort in terms of reading and understanding the issue and her making stops around the state at shelters and homeless programs," he said. "My advice is to acknowledge the numbers and take that off the table. It's been bipartisan neglect of the issue. The question is, where do we go from here?"

Funding for homelessness

'No one was advocating'

Volk partly blames advocates for disappearing from the Capitol after federal funding began to flow in the 1990s.

"I'm to blame for this, too, because I was the head of a large agency, a provider," he said. "All of a sudden, the feds got into homelessness in the '90s and money started to fall from the sky, so we basically left the statehouse. We had money and new programs, so state money was pretty much forgotten."

But federal money carries very proscriptive rules, Volk said, and is targeted at single adults with mental health and substance abuse issues, not families and children.

It doesn't fund emergency shelters, the front-door triage of the system. With state funding for emergency shelter stagnant, Wisconsin has lost much of its ability to provide the social services that move the homeless toward permanent housing, he said.

Further, while federal funds can be used to build permanent supportive housing for the homeless, services that make the approach successful must be secured from other sources, Volk said. Wisconsin doesn't provide such money.

Meanwhile, attempts to establish a statewide homelessness coalition in the 1990s and in 2009 failed, meaning there was no organized involvement in the state budget process, and there were no routine meetings with lawmakers or contacts with the governor, Volk said.

A one-night snapshot of homelessness

In the mid-2000s, the administration of Gov. Jim Doyle, a Democrat, created an Interagency Council on Homelessness charged with developing a plan to end homelessness in the state. The 14-page plan, completed in 2007, is called "Homeward Wisconsin."

The plan, however, has no metrics to measure progress, no funding recommendations and no assignment of tasks, Volk said. The council, he said, was dormant from 2008 to 2015 and recently revived, but like its predecessor, does not include higher-level administrators and the clout that comes with them.



State lawmakers struggle to name a go-to “champion” on the issue. And a modest package of bills by Rep. Melissa Sargent, D-Madison, to address youth homelessness, has stalled. GOP leaders denied her request for a study group on that issue this summer.

“I’m a Milwaukee Democrat, but I don’t want this to be a ‘bash the Republican side for not having done anything,’ because the reality of the history is that the Dems didn’t do anything either,” Volk said. “The reason I think that happened is not because they are bad people, it’s because no one was advocating at the state level for 20 years.”

'WHEDA's got it right'

The state’s main housing engine is the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA), which distributes tens of millions of dollars in federal tax credits each year for projects with units for lower-income residents.

The city has begun to take advantage of those credits. Using its Affordable Housing Plan, now in its second year, it’s contributing \$8.8 million — with at least \$2.9 million from the county — to help secure \$53.6 million in tax credits for eight projects costing a total \$94 million. They will deliver 463 affordable units, including 114 for the homeless.

In May, Kleefisch and WHEDA deputy executive director Brian Schimming announced a total of \$142 million in credits over a decade, including the latest for Madison, that will support the creation of 1,166 low-income units statewide.

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“WHEDA’s got it right, but they’re a lone voice,” Madison Mayor Paul Soglin said. “WHEDA is limited by the availability of tax credits, but with the tax credits they’ve got and administering the program, from our viewpoint, it’s working. But we need more resources, they need more resources, and it has to be more than tax credits.”

In 2009, the Legislature created another funding opportunity by letting cities keep open for an extra year tax incremental financing (TIF) districts set to close, with the tax revenue available for affordable housing efforts anywhere in the municipality.

But, “when you look at the Legislature, with the exception of one anomaly, which is using the TIF dollars, there’s no evidence of a plan or a program,” Soglin said.

Kleefisch disagreed: “There are a lot of programs that can touch this population, but unfortunately we see examples fairly consistently that people are unaware of that.”

Point in Time homeless count

A volunteer, left, talks with a homeless man spending the night at a bus shelter in Downtown Madison during the city's Point in Time count on Jan. 27. Volunteers across the country attempt to count on a single night in January all sheltered and unsheltered homeless people. Dane County's count that night was 663.

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M.P. KING -- State Journal

'A realistic advocacy goal'

The recommendations by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness draw heavily on practices in Minnesota, where a broad, bipartisan approach accompanies the far greater direct funding.

The Wisconsin coalition proposes:

- An interagency council chaired by the governor with mandatory involvement of secretaries and directors of all state agencies that can address homelessness.
- Better use of existing federal and state resources.
- More state funding for emergency shelters.
- A homelessness prevention program like a temporary one in Milwaukee County that reduced eviction rates during the Great Recession.
- A state fund for services attached to permanent supportive housing projects.
- That WHEDA come up with new strategies to house people with very low incomes.
- A close look at social impact bonding — a public-private partnership to fund some social program costs.

An increase to \$10 million would be “a realistic advocacy goal in this environment” Volk said, but it may be more important to replicate the political muscle of Minnesota’s interagency council. “When you look at the need, and at state spending, it will take time,” he said.

Kleefisch said it’s more about aligning resources so the state can “best benefit those who are telling us that they need help.”



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Glossary of terms

Emergency shelter: Short-term, nightly shelter. Supportive services may or may not be provided. The number of total days allowed often is capped at 90.

Transitional housing: An interim step between emergency shelter and permanent housing for households with significant barriers to housing. It helps homeless people overcome trauma, regain stability and rebuild their support networks within 24 months. Services can include case management and rent assistance.

Rapid re-housing: A temporary program for homeless people who have lived independently before and do not need permanent supports. It seeks a quick turnaround in fortunes, emphasizing housing search and relocation services and short- and medium-term rental assistance. Some participants will have disabilities, but most will not.

Permanent supportive housing: Assistance for people with the most complex challenges and most severe service needs. It targets people with chronic impairments and supports them on a permanent basis, with indefinite leasing or rental assistance.

Chronically homeless: An individual with a disability who has been homeless for the last 12 months continuously or on at least four occasions in the last three years that cumulatively total at least 12 months.

Affordable housing: Housing in which households, regardless of income, spend no more than 30 percent of their income on it. A household that spends more than 30 percent of adjusted gross household income on housing is considered cost-burdened.

Housing First: An approach in which homeless people are given immediate access to housing without prerequisites like sobriety or a willingness to participate in services. It typically is designed for people with complex needs and who are the least likely to be able to proactively seek and obtain housing on their own.

Intake system: The method by which homeless or near-homeless people can find and access shelter, housing and services. Typically, the intake process includes outreach, a basic assessment, an eligibility determination and program referral or placement.

How many are homeless?

It's hard to count the homeless, with no single recognized method and varying definitions. The federal departments of Housing and Urban Development and Education use different methods; another count covers only those who have been served by agencies receiving government money. The Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness combines two counts and uses a formula to produce estimates. Here's a look at some state indicators:

- Perhaps 20,000 people are homeless in the state on any given night, according to data-based estimates by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness.
- An annual federally required count — which does not include those temporarily living in motels or with a family member or friend — ranks the state fifth nationally in the increase in homelessness, a 24.5 percent rise, between 2007 and 2015. The count, which relies on volunteers with a mix of training, savvy and support, helps shape how much HUD funding goes to each area.

- The number of homeless children in the state rose a staggering 241 percent, from 5,354 in 2003 to 18,390 in 2015, according to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data.
- 27,532 people experiencing homelessness were served by state- or federally funded agencies in 2015, up 18 percent since 2010, according to the latest report of the Wisconsin Homeless Management Information System.

About the reporters

Wisconsin State Journal reporters Dean Mosiman and Doug Erickson have spent the last several months reporting on the issue of homelessness in Madison.

Mosiman, 58, has covered city government for the State Journal since 1997. A native of Minneapolis, he previously worked for newspapers in California, New York and Washington state.

Erickson, 51, covers K-12 education and religion for the newspaper and has worked here since 1999. The South Dakota transplant previously worked for The (Appleton) Post-Crescent, as well as newspapers in Georgia and Minnesota.

Contact Mosiman at 608-252-6141 or dmosiman@madison.com and Erickson at 608-252-6149 or derickson@madison.com.

How to help, how to get it

If you are homeless or near-homeless and need help: For emergency shelter, call the toll-free Dane County Housing Crisis Line at 855-510-2323. For other housing questions or general assistance, call the United Way of Dane County helpline at 2-1-1.

If you would like to help the homeless: The United Way's 2-1-1 helpline also is the place to call to give help. Or go to volunteeryourtime.org.

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