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No HOME of Their Own

A solitary life

One man's longtime homelessness a symptom of a systemic problem in Berks County



Richard "Abe" Abraham lives in a tent tucked under a bridge in Reading. He has been homeless for years and will not go to a shelter even on the coldest nights. He is one of the only known unsheltered people in the city.

By DAVID MEKEEL READING EAGLE

WEARING AN UNZIPPED coat and slightly dirty Philadelphia Phillies baseball cap — a new one is tucked away in a plastic bag for the start of next season — Richard Abraham stood beneath a concrete bridge near Pandora Park with a contented smile on his face. "I've got everything here," he said. Behind Abe, as he's known to his friends, were his worldly possessions. A dusty gray and blue tent, its front right corner sagging inward, was filled with a vast collection of sleeping bags and blankets. There were a metal-framed folding rocking chair, trash bags filled with clothing and other items, a stack of bags of charcoal. More was tucked inside a gap in the concrete: a teddy bear in a Raiders football uniform, coats and even a Reading High football helmet. [See Solitary >>> A4]

About the series

Homelessness is a complex issue and often hard to see. Each year in Berks County, hundreds of men, women and children find themselves without a steady and safe place to stay. Some end up in shelters; others find themselves on the street. Dozens of organizations do their best to help them. In a four-day series, **No Home of Their Own**, the *Reading Eagle* takes a look at some of those organizations, and a handful of those facing homelessness share their stories.

- TODAY, PART 1:** The man under the bridge, street medicine and Family Promise. **A4-A8**
- MONDAY, PART 2:** Homeless students, Mary's Shelter and when an abandoned house is home.
- TUESDAY, PART 3:** Suddenly homeless, Opportunity House and the Salvation Army.
- WEDNESDAY, PART 4:** Behind bars to a shelter to redemption, Hope Rescue Mission and on the brink.

Mueller cites Manafort's 'bold' crimes

Sentencing memo says he 'brazenly violated the law'

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort committed crimes that cut to "the heart of the criminal justice system" and over the years deceived everyone from bookkeepers and banks to federal prosecutors and his own lawyers, according to a sentencing memo filed Saturday by special counsel Robert Mueller's office.

In the memo, submitted in one of two criminal cases Manafort faces, prosecutors do not yet take a position on how much prison time he should serve or whether to stack the punishment on top of a separate sentence he will soon receive in a Virginia prosecution. But they do depict Manafort as a longtime and unrepentant criminal who committed "bold" crimes, including under the spotlight of his role as campaign chairman and later while on bail, and who does not deserve any leniency.

"For over a decade, Manafort repeatedly and brazenly violated the law," prosecutors wrote. "His crimes continued up through the time he was first indicted in October 2017 and remarkably went unabated even after indictment."

Citing Manafort's lies to the FBI, several government



Paul Manafort

agencies and his own lawyer, prosecutors said that "upon release from jail, Manafort presents a grave risk of recidivism."

The 25-page memo, filed in federal court in Washington, is likely the last major filing by prosecutors as Manafort heads into his sentencing hearings next month and as Mueller's investigation approaches a conclusion. Manafort, who has been jailed for months and turns 70 in April, will have a chance to file his own sentencing recommendation next week.

He and his longtime business partner, Rick Gates, were the first two people indicted in Mueller's investigation. Manafort pleaded guilty to two counts of conspiracy arising from his Ukrainian political consulting work and his efforts to tamper with witnesses.

As part of that plea, he agreed to cooperate with Mueller's team, a move that could have helped him avoid a longer prison sentence. But within weeks, prosecutors say he repeatedly lied to investigators.

TODAY

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TURNING POVERTY FIGHT INTO THEIR ART FORM

Reading High students create billboards and videos to aid their less-fortunate classmates. **B2**



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GERMAN CARDINAL: STOP THE SECRECY

He tells the pope's sex abuse summit the church has worsened the crisis by shrouding it. **A10**

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CITY MUSEUM DONATES COLLECTION

The rare artifacts will be the core of Albright's new African-American studies center. **B1**

Tri-County

NOW IT'S HER TIME TO MANAGE FAMILY

Pottstown's main street manager steps down to help the family's small business stay afloat. **B3**

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50° 13°



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# No HOME of Their Own

# A solitary life

[From A1 >>>]

To an outsider, the piles of stuff on the cold hard dirt might look unkempt, like discarded leftovers destined for a landfill. But to Abe, they represent home.

Abe is homeless. He's lived at his spot under the bridge for the past 13 years, getting by on donations and the little his Social Security checks can afford him.

He refuses to seek the refuge of a shelter — he says people there steal from him and he'd rather be alone — instead braving the elements and other dangers living on the street force him to face.

"I like it," the 63-year-old said. "It's peaceful and quiet."

Abe is not alone.

On a Friday late last month, the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness headed out for its annual point-in-time count; volunteers scour the county to record how many homeless individuals they can find. The count is required by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and will determine funding and track trends.

The count found only 10 people actively living on the

street. However, because the count is done in the morning in the dead of winter, mostly in and around the city, and most people living on the street have found their way to emergency shelters or headed out to a soup kitchen for breakfast, those who participate say it's likely not a perfectly accurate reflection.

If it were done in the warmth of spring, perhaps sometime in May, the results would likely be much higher, they say.

The coalition also does a count of people staying in homeless shelters, which over the past couple months have been overstuffed with people looking to get out of the frigid weather. That count sat at 513.

The numbers from the count are sent to HUD, where they're run through an algorithm to come up with an official estimate. That means the numbers the coalition came up with in January aren't official, only preliminary, raw data.

But nonetheless, despite their shortcomings, they show that homelessness is a real problem in Berks County.

### The big picture

"Do we have it bad?" Jack Williams, coalition executive director, asked. "Yeah. If we didn't have it bad we wouldn't have over 100 guys staying in the Hope Rescue Mission."

Williams' role, and that of



READING EAGLE: SUSAN L. ANGSTADT

"I like it," says Richard "Abe" Abraham, who lives under a bridge in Reading. "It's peaceful and quiet." Abe is seen occasionally by the street medicine team from Tower Health.

the coalition, is to monitor, oversee and coordinate local efforts to fight homelessness. The coalition serves as the local continuum of care, an HUD designation for a local agency that takes on those tasks.

Every county in the U.S. is required by HUD to have a continuum-of-care agency to make sure that groups receiving federal funding to fight homelessness follow federal rules.

"We make sure agencies that get HUD money are compliant," Williams said. "We have a lot of responsibilities, but very little authority."

Williams knows a thing or two about homelessness in Berks.

According to him, there's no single reason people end up homeless. Some do because they can't get a job, others because of struggles with addiction. For some it's a lack of education, and for others it's bad decision-making.

But Williams said the overarching factor in homelessness is poverty. In a county with a city that has been ranked the poorest in the nation, that's a big issue in Berks.

Despite low costs for rent in Reading, some of the lowest in the state, the city and county still manage to have extremely high eviction rates, Williams said. Based on data from the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, Reading has by far the highest eviction rate for a mid-sized city in Pennsylvania and is close to twice the rate of larger cities such as Philadelphia and Erie.

There were 1,143 evictions in Reading in 2016, according to the data. That amounts to 3.13 households evicted every day, and a rate of 6.22 evictions per 100 renter homes for the year.

"That's how poor we are," he said.

The result is overwhelming need: need for warm places to sleep, need for food, need for shoes and hats and gloves.

"It's everything," said Mike



Abe tends to his cat, Girlie, who's been with him for about a dozen years.

Noll, street outreach and jobs manager for the coalition. "In the last two or three weeks we had a bunch of families with no food. They come to us for everything from bus passes to coats. It's everything you can think of."

Federal data don't show quite the same picture. With a way of counting that some who work with the homeless consider flawed, its numbers look much different than what Noll and Williams see day to day.

For example, the official HUD estimate in 2018 found 562 homeless people in Berks — the raw number, before HUD ran it through its formula to come up with its estimate, was 443 — an amount that includes those on the street, in shelters and in transitional housing.

Of those 562, only 11 were identified as unsheltered and five as chronically homeless.

HUD defines chronic homelessness as "an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years."

The disabling condition used in the definition can include substance abuse disorder, a serious mental illness, developmental disability or chronic physical illness or disability.

Those conditions have to be documented and reported at the time of the count.

So while the federal data appear to show Berks doesn't

have a large population of chronically homeless individuals, that's more a matter of paperwork and semantics. A stop inside a shelter, a soup kitchen or beneath a bridge tells a much different tale.

### A life of extremes

Abe gave a knowing smile and playfully dismissive wave as Tracy Davidheiser spoke to him.

Davidheiser is a Reading Hospital nurse and coordinator of Tower Health Medical Group's street medicine team, a group of nurses and doctors who visit shelters and other sites a few times a month to provide the homeless and poverty-stricken with free medical care. She's known Abe for a while, and took the team to see him on a Monday afternoon in late January.

She was worried about Abe. The end of the week would turn historically cold, and she tried to convince him to find a place indoors to ride it out.

"I have places to go if I have to," he reassured her.

Dealing with frigid temperatures is nothing new to Abe. He's been on the street a long time, and his current 13-year stint under the bridge isn't his first bout with homelessness.

Abe grew up in Reading, living with his father at 11th and Cotton streets. He played a lot of sports as a kid — basketball, soccer and baseball — and graduated from Reading High and Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center in 1974.

But even before Abe earned that diploma, he got a taste of homelessness.

His dad passed away when he was 16. His mom died when he was in elementary school, which meant he was on his own.

The people he knew as mom and dad were actually his grandparents, Abe explained, something he didn't know back then. His mom, it turned out, was actually the woman he knew as an aunt.

Those revelations came much later for Abe, not soon enough to help a teen suddenly alone, adrift and unsure of what to do.

With nowhere else to go, and no way to pay the bills at home without his dad, he camped out in the woods around 10th and South Playground. He eventually was discovered and placed in foster care.

Abe didn't care for that too much, so he split when he turned 18.

After high school, he worked for a time as an orderly at Berks Heim, the county nursing home, before starting a string of jobs, mostly in local factories. From time to time he got laid off, was not able to afford his rent and was evicted.

Sometimes he'd crash with a friend, maybe sleep in a friend's car, or in a room at a local bar or the YMCA. Other times he would camp out or find a place like his current bridge dwelling to stay.

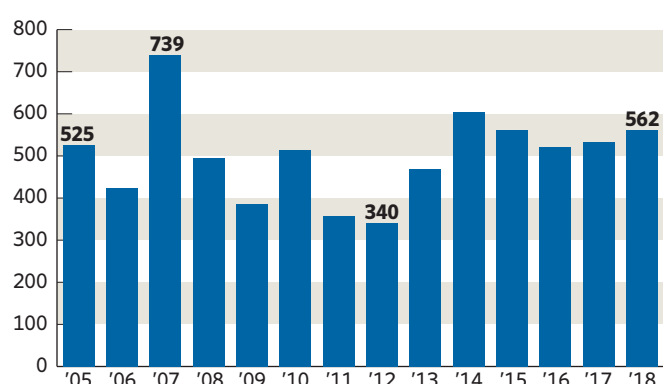
For a while, Abe and a girlfriend had a house together, both working full time. That, like everything else, came and went, and Abe was back to bouncing through life, in and out of homelessness.

He became accustomed to

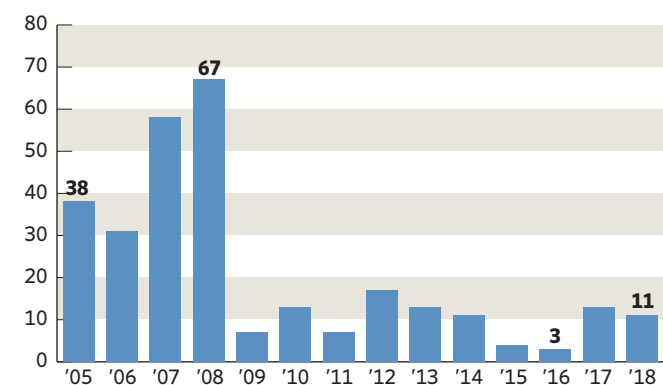
## Homeless count in Berks

Each year, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development requires a count of homeless people in each county across the U.S. The count records people living on the street, in homeless shelters and in transitional housing.

### TOTAL HOMELESS



### UNSHeltered



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

READING EAGLE: BOB SCHNEIDER

## 2018 Berks homeless profiles

	Emergency shelter	Transitional housing	Unsheltered	Total
Chronically homeless	4	0	1	5
Severely mentally ill	44	64	7	115
Chronic substance abuse	37	83	3	123
Veteran	21	18	0	39
Victim of domestic violence	18	8	0	26
Unaccompanied youth under 18	0	0	0	0

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development



READING EAGLE: SUSAN L. ANGSTADT

In January, representatives from various agencies fanned out around Reading to look for unsheltered homeless people. They already had counted those at shelters earlier in the week and on this day were seeking those who remained on the street.

the unsettled lifestyle.

"I've been homeless so many times," he said. "I don't mind it."

**'Not scared of anything'**

Abe gets by on the little cash he gets from Social Security, working a few odd jobs here and there, and the kindness of others. He's well-known around Reading, often joking that he's the "most famous homeless person in Reading."

Friends visit and drop off supplies; officials from different agencies and police officers check in on him. There's even a guy — Abe doesn't know who he is — who occasionally stops his pickup truck on the bridge and tosses a couple of bags of food over the side.

The last time they came tumbling down with a thud they included pasta and chicken wings, Abe said.

"People just bring me stuff," he said. "I've got stuff out the butt."

Abe also gets visits from his half-brother, who lives in Womelsdorf. And he has a son, Shawn, but isn't in touch with him or Shawn's mother.

Abe's site under the bridge is one he knew from his childhood. He used to play there as a kid and drank barrels of beer there with friends as a teenager.

He spends his days and nights there tending to his cat, Girlie, who's been with him for about a dozen years. She came out of the woods one day, small enough to sit in his hand, and decided to stick around.

"She eats before I do," he said proudly about his love for his furry companion.

Sometimes Abe gets company from other wildlife. Two raccoons live in a drainage pipe, and deer sometimes walk along the river. He's even spotted a black bear once or twice.

One time, a few years ago, a friend stopped by to see him. The friend opened Abe's tent to see if he was there and found an opossum and a raccoon inside, tearing things to shreds.

"I hope they don't come back when I'm in there," Abe said with a laugh.

He likes to take walks downtown, chatting with friends and picking up a newspaper to read. At night, he can usually be found back at his site downing some Steel Reserve malt liquor, plastic bottles of which are piled several feet high beneath the bridge.

He has a radio to listen to music or Phillies games, although he said it hasn't been working and needs to be re-

placed.

He isn't scared to live outdoors. He's had run-ins with gangs and other troublemakers — one time he even witnessed a violent gang brawl at Pandora Park — but claims he's able to take care of himself and discourage people from messing with him.

"I'm not scared of anything," he said confidently.

He's seen at least two people jump to their deaths from the bridge, one of whom was someone he knew, over his 13 years there. He speaks about them quietly, clearly unsettled by the images planted in his brain.

**Changes ahead?**

Abe isn't always alone. He says he's dating a 36-year-old woman who lives with him under the bridge. He pointed out her suitcase and a pile of her things and said the two plan to get an apartment together.

She has a good job and can afford a place, he said.

An apartment will give Abe the one thing his current situation lacks.

"I'll have TV," he said. "That's what I want. That's the only thing I miss. I miss cable."

Once, he recalled, he was in Reading Hospital with alcohol poisoning — the result of some bad moonshine — where the nurses were worried that he wasn't sleeping at night. Well, Abe told them, he could see the TV from his bed and didn't want to miss an opportunity to watch.

His time on the streets hasn't hurt his health, he said. He's lost a little weight, going from a size 36 waist to a size 30, but other than that feels good.

"I'm 63, I'm in good health," he said. "I don't smoke — well, maybe weed sometimes. And I can still run. I could always run."

Abe has become accustomed to his spot under the bridge. It's become his home, despite its rustic deficiencies.

"Other than as a kid, this is the place I've stayed the longest," he said.

Despite his obvious affection for his home, Abe said he might be ready for something new a week after that brutal cold stretch in which temperatures dipped below zero.

Although he said he was fine wrapped up in piles of blankets inside his tent — despite his assurances to David—heiser he didn't seek a spot indoors — and still enjoys living outdoors, he speaks excitedly of plans to settle down with his new girlfriend.

He's hoping to qualify for

federal Section 8 housing assistance, which will help stretch his meager income and his girlfriend's income from her job.

"We're saving up for a down payment on an apartment and that's it," he said. "That's the end of the man under the bridge."

Abe said he plans to be indoors by his birthday on Aug. 6. "This is it; this is the end," he said. "I'm done. I've already cheated death, I'm not going to cheat it no more."

**The huts project**

Cases like Abe's are tough ones.

"Some people are never going to get out of the street mentality," said Williams, the coalition executive director. "We can educate and connect people, but if they don't want help there's not much we can do."

"I can think of countless times we've gotten a person to a point where we think they're on the right track and other things in their life get in the way," Noll added. "There are so many hurdles for the people we're serving."

That doesn't mean it's not worth trying.

"I do think we can put a positive dent on homelessness," Williams said.

For the most part, people around Berks aren't really aware of the scope of local homelessness, Williams said. Were it not for his job, he says, he probably wouldn't be aware either.

But homelessness is a countywide problem, he said. While it may look differently in the city, it exists everywhere.

Williams has a few ideas that could take a bite out of the homelessness problem. But they need community buy-in, and someone with authority to take the lead.

"There's got to be a project, something people can connect to," he said.

One of those ideas is to create homeless huts. The huts would be small buildings, placed on a vacant lot, with locking doors.

People could come to the coalition, sign a contract and get a key, giving them a free place to stay out of the elements. The huts would be heated and have air conditioning, and a bathroom would be built on-site.

A project like that, Williams said, probably would require the city to provide the land as well as electricity and water. Local businesses could provide the funds to build and

maintain the huts.

"I'd be the first person to put down the money to buy one," he said.

With a project like the huts, community members could feel personally invested in fighting homelessness, Williams said. They'd be able to visit the hut sites and, perhaps, get to know the people staying there.

**Who will take the lead?**

Another idea, one a bit simpler, would be to create a parking lot where people could stay in their cars. The lot would have a fence and a guard as well as a bathroom.

Williams said that would give people a safe place to stay, instead of worrying who's going to come knocking on their car window each night.

Projects like homeless huts and secure parking lots face challenges, such as neighbors not too keen on having them nearby.

"We have to overcome that not-in-my-backyard mentality," Williams said.

There also has to be someone willing to knock down barriers. The best case, Williams said, would be for a government entity like City Hall to play that role. But it could also be a church or a local nonprofit agency.

"Someone needs to take the lead," he said. "We need a big, global effort. If we do that, we could be a model for the rest of the country."

There's also a desperate need in Berks for more permanent, supported housing for those staying in shelters to transition to, Williams said. Currently, the county has supportive housing for only about a third of the people living in shelters, he said.

Of course, Williams said, those kinds of ideas merely address the immediate need for shelter. Homelessness is about much, much more.

"It's so much deeper; there's so many levels to it," he said.

But taking care of that one basic need — a safe, warm, consistent place to sleep — opens the door to solving the underlying issues that lead to homelessness.

And for many who grew up poor and remained so into adulthood, it would be a glimmer of light.

"We have so much generational poverty," Williams said. "It's this generation telling the next that there's no hope. We have to show that there is hope."

Contact David Mekeel: 610-371-5014 or dmekeel@readingeagle.com.

**Local resources**

**Shelter services**

**Opportunity House**, 430 N. Second St., 610-374-4696; emergency shelter service. Serves men, women and families.

**Hope Rescue Mission**, 645 N. Sixth St., 610-375-4224; emergency shelter service. Serves men only.

**Mary's Shelter**, 615 Kenhorst Blvd., 610-376-1973; serves pregnant women and unaccompanied teens.

**Family Promise**, 325 N. Fifth St., 610-373-3323; serves families with children.

**Easy Does It Inc.**, 647 Walnut St., 610-373-9550; serves men and women in recovery.

**Safe Berks**, 255 Chestnut St., emergency hotline 610-372-9540; serves victims of domestic violence. (Victims of human trafficking should call the national hotline at 888-373-7888.)

**Clothing and food**

**Greater Berks Food Bank**, 610-926-5802; visit berksfoodbank.org for a full list of food pantries, soup kitchens and other resources across Berks County.

**Kennedy House Soup Kitchen**, 532 Spruce St., 610-378-1947; open Saturdays and Sundays from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

**New Journey Community Outreach**, 138 S. Sixth St., 610-375-3310; open Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

**City Thrift Shop**, 314 Penn St., 610-376-3320; provides low- to no-cost clothing.

**Hope Rescue Mission Thrift Store**, 645 N. Sixth St., 610-375-4224.

**City Light Drop-In Center**, 246 N. Ninth St., 610-207-5184; open weekdays 6 to 10 a.m. Breakfast served 7 to 8 a.m.

**Bethel AME Church Soup Kitchen**, 330 W. Windsor St., 610-376-7555; open Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**House of Good Food Soup Kitchen**, 140 W. Buttonwood St., 610-478-9333; open Mondays through Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to noon.

**Drug, alcohol and mental health services**

**Treatment Access Service Center**, 19 N. Sixth St., 610-375-4426; for all drug and alcohol treatment, including detox.

**Council on Chemical Abuse**, 601 Penn St., Suite 600, 610-376-8669; for information and referrals.

**Service Access and Management**, 19 N. Sixth St., 610-236-0530; for mental health and developmental disability intake and referrals.

**Berks Counseling Center**, 645 Penn St., 610-373-4281; for drug and alcohol counseling.

**Greater Reading Mental Health Alliance**, 1234 Penn Ave., Wyomissing, 610-775-3000.

**Wellness services**

**Co-County Wellness Services and Berks AIDS Network**, 429 Walnut St., 610-375-6523.

**Berks Community Health Center**, 838 Penn St., 610-988-4838.

**2nd Street Dispensary**, 430 N. Second St., 610-898-0400.

**St. Joseph's Family and Women's Care**, Reed and Walnut streets, 610-378-2440.

**Lebanon VA Medical Center**, 800-409-8771.

**Berks County Veterans Clinic**, 145 N. Sixth St., 610-208-4717.

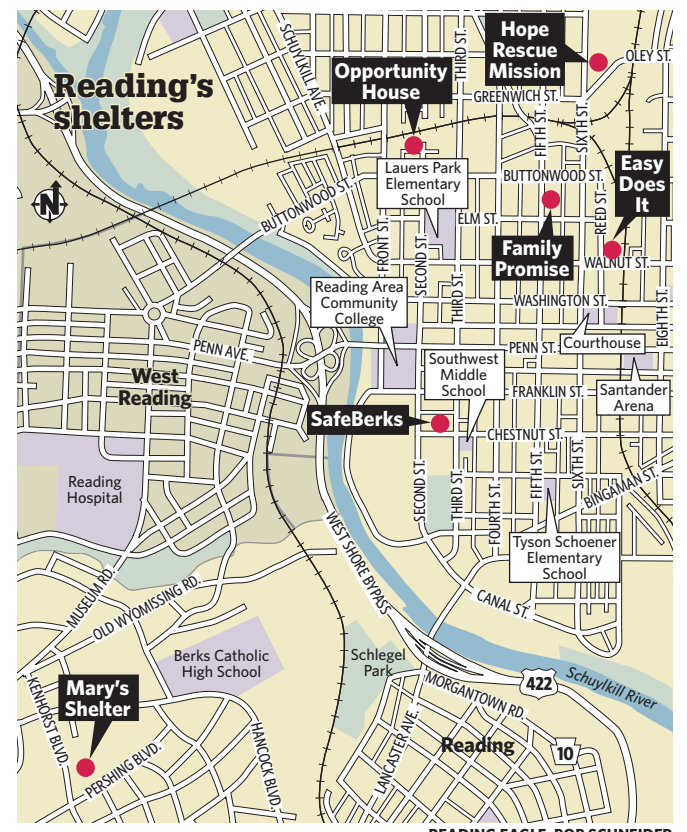
**Other resources**

**Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Inc.**, 831 Walnut St., 610-372-7222.

**Berks County Intermediate Unit Homeless Student Program**, 610-987-8509.

**The Salvation Army**, 610-373-5208.

**Catholic Charities**, 610-376-7144.



READING EAGLE: BOB SCHNEIDER

## No HOME of Their Own

# Medical team is taking it to the streets

BY DAVID MEKEEL  
READING EAGLE

A black patch over his left eye, a man with a long white beard, maybe in his late 60s or early 70s, sat down across a table from Tracy Davidheiser.

It was early on a Monday morning — a little after 7 — and the man had made his way up the steep stairs to a small room with brightly painted walls on the second floor of City Light Ministries' North Ninth Street building. Davidheiser, a registered nurse from Reading Hospital, and the pair of doctors sitting to her right were a welcome sight to him.

"I'm glad you guys came," he said. "I've been sick for four days."

The man told Davidheiser it was his birthday. He also mentioned that he had open-heart surgery not long ago, and his heart rate had been low recently.

But the man hadn't stopped at a doctor's office to get a checkup. He hadn't called a physician to share his concerns.

That's because he was homeless, which makes following up on his health care a bit difficult. Which is why Davidheiser and her colleagues were there that day.

### Hitting the streets

Davidheiser is the coordinator of Tower Health Medical Group's street medicine program, which meets the homeless and indigent where they are to provide free medical care. It gives those who have a hard time accessing care an opportunity to get help.

"You're not able to prioritize your health when you have to think, 'What am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep tonight? Am I going to be safe? Is it going to be cold?'" said Desha Dickson, associate vice president, community wellness. "Survival takes over."

The street medicine program got its start at Tower Health Medical Group thanks to Dr. Eugene York. He first heard about street medicine in 1994, when the "father of street medicine," Dr. Jim Withers, strapped on a backpack and headed onto the

streets of Pittsburgh.

Since then, the idea has spread across the country and world, York said.

York has worked with street medicine teams based in Harrisburg and the Lehigh Valley and proposed the idea when he came to Reading. Colleagues Dr. Anthony A. Donato Jr. and Dr. Sarah Luber quickly jumped onboard.

The pitch came at the perfect time. Dickson said the hospital was just finishing its community health needs assessment research.

"That research showed us people who are homeless in Berks face tremendous barriers to health care," she said.

With a \$25,000 grant from Santander Bank, the street team was born in March 2016. That first year, the program served 386 people.

In 2018, it reached more than 700.

### 'We see everything'

The program is solely funded by grants — with Friends of Reading Hospital and Reading Hospital Foundation major donors — which have so far totaled about \$300,000. Davidheiser is the lone full-time employee dedicated to the program, with about 75 doctors, nurses and other hospital staff volunteering to participate.

Teams — featuring at least one of York, Donata or Luber — head out four or five times a month, setting up shop at City Light, Hope Rescue Mission, the YMCA and New Journey soup kitchen. They stay at each as long as it takes to see whoever shows up.

Team members also make stops to see individual homeless people they know in the community, sometimes venturing to wooded campsites or to sites tucked beneath bridges.

The care they give can include prescribing something for a stomach illness, checking blood pressure, referring patients to a specialist and helping to manage an ongoing condition like diabetes. York said the program even has a pocket ultrasound machine that can detect pneumonia or fluid in a patient's lungs, and a panoptic scope for eye exams. "We see everything, A to Z,"



READING EAGLE: SUSAN L. ANGSTADT

Dr. Sarah Luber with the street medicine team of the Tower Health Wellness Program listens to the lungs of a patient at City Lights on North Ninth Street. The team goes to outreaches and shelters in the city to treat the homeless.



Dr. Anthony A. Donato Jr. at New Journey Community Outreach. The team visits during the soup kitchen hours.

York said.

Luber said the teams come across a lot of patients with addiction issues; she said more than half are active addicts or have a history of drug use. She said more than half of the patients also have some sort of mental health issue.

About 30 percent of the patients are recurring, Luber said. Some they have even seen for a year or two.

"There are definitely a lot of regulars, I would say," Luber said. "Some even just come to say 'hi.'"

### A health care bridge

The idea isn't for the program to become people's primary care option, Dickson said, but is to help with urgent needs and provide a connection to more regular treatment.

"The goal is for this to become a bridge between no care and primary care," she said.

Often, for someone without a secure place to live, making

that transition can be a challenge. Davidheiser is tasked with checking on patients seen through the street medicine program to make sure they follow up like they're supposed to.

Many times, the litany of barriers they face prevent it. "Imagine if you're homeless and you have to do a colonoscopy prep," York said. "It's impossible. There are so many things we don't think of, and then there's that ah-ha moment when you realize the challenges."

Dickson recalled a gentleman who received treatment for a sprained ankle. The doctor told him to stay off it, to kick back and relax while it heals. But the man was homeless and walked everywhere. He had to walk to the shelter, to the soup kitchen.

Taking it easy wasn't an option.

Or a man York treated during a street medicine stop who had diabetes. When York saw

him again the man hadn't filled his insulin prescription.

"He couldn't pay the \$3 copay," York said. "And he was too proud to ask for help."

The hospital has increased its cooperation with local agencies that help the homeless and others living in poverty, Dickson and York said. Often the hospital, on its own, can't address the needs of the homeless patients, can't surmount the hurdles impacting their health.

Dickson told of a woman who lived in a shabby apartment with her kids. The apartment had a mold problem so bad it looked like wallpaper. The woman and her kids kept showing up with respiratory issues, would receive treatment and then head right back to the moldy apartment causing their illnesses.

"Just providing care within the four walls of the hospital isn't enough for some people," Dickson said.

### Changing perceptions

While the care the street medicine program provides can be life-changing for its patients, it's creating other changes as well.

"One of the interesting things about street medicine is perceptions shatter," York said. "All of us, when we go out, have preconceived notions of what homeless is."

Those notions are often wrong, York said.

He remembered meeting a young man who was living under a bridge. He had lost his job at the same time his wife had a stroke.

The couple lost their house.

His wife and his daughter ended up in a shelter, and the man ended up in the street.

Dickson said about 80 percent of those deemed homeless are "situationally" homeless, not chronic. They're the kind of people who live paycheck to paycheck and come up short, in need of some time and a break or two to get back on their feet.

It's not what most people picture when they think of homelessness, she said. It's not people laying on the sidewalk, or panhandling for spare change.

"I think people generalize homelessness based on that chronic 20 percent," Dickson said.

Dickson thinks the street medicine program has helped those involved improve the way they communicate with their patients. It makes them more understanding, more likely to delve into the challenges a patient may be facing.

And often that interaction, being able to sit down with someone and knowing they care, makes all the difference.

York said he had a patient who was touched simply because the doctors referred to him as sir, a title not bestowed upon him for years.

"Something that simple, it's amazing," York said.

Contact David Mekeel: 610-371-5014 or [dmekeel@readingeagle.com](mailto:dmekeel@readingeagle.com).

**TO LEARN MORE** about the Reading Hospital street medicine team visit [bewellberks.org](http://bewellberks.org). To donate to the program visit [reading.towerhealth.org/foundation](http://reading.towerhealth.org/foundation).



After New Journey, the medical team heads out to visit an unsheltered man in the city.



Doctors and nurses from Tower Health visit homeless shelters, soup kitchens and treat people living in shelters or in the open.



READING EAGLE: SUSAN L. ANGSTADT

At Family Promise of Berks County Elise Chesson, executive director, and Darrius Palmer, U-Turn case manager, talk to two homeless teens they have been helping.

# Agency looking to help homeless make a U-turn

Family Promise of Berks County helps keep together families that have nowhere to live. There are also programs for homeless youths.

By **DAVID MEKEEL**  
READING EAGLE

Elise Chesson and Darrius Palmer could spend all day telling tragic tale after tragic tale.

Like the young couple living in an abandoned house who were arrested for trespassing and ended up staying for months in a tent in the woods.

Or the teenage girl who got kicked out of the house and couldn't find a place to stay. With no money, no food and no place to go, she ended up being arrested for prostitution within a week.

Or the teenage girl who stared, tears forming in her eyes, for 20 minutes at a school form asking her for an emergency contact, not having a name to write down.

Or the single mom not making enough to afford an apartment who had to live doubled or tripled up in apartments with other families. At one of those apartments the landlord found out and threatened to kick her and her kids out unless she agreed to sleep with him.

"There are so many horror stories," Palmer said. "These kids have gone through so many things I can't imagine."

Chesson and Palmer work at Family Promise of Berks County, Chesson as executive director and Palmer as a case manager. Those are jobs that put them on the front lines of the fight to help the homeless of Berks County.

Family Promise is a national organization that originated in New Jersey with the goal of doing something more for the homeless "than just giving them a sandwich," but didn't require building a huge shelter, Chesson said. The founders came up with the idea to use local churches and their congregations.

Churches that volunteer with Family Promise open their doors to homeless families for a week at a time, giving them a place to stay, and members of the congregation

help prepare meals for the families. Churches typically take part two to four times a year, Chesson said.

The organization opened a Berks County branch in 2007. There are 30 local congregations that partner with the program, 22 of which serve as shelter sites. The organization serves three families at a time, up to 14 people. Transportation to the shelter site is provided by Family Promise.

The families can stay in the program for up to 90 days and take part in an intensive program that includes lessons on budgeting and job training.

"What they learn here they can take with them," Chesson said.

Chesson said Family Promise fills a particular niche of homeless families.

"We serve families that can't be served elsewhere," she said. "Like a single father with children or a mom with a 15-year-old son."

Chesson said those types of families usually can't be housed at other shelters, which typically separate men from women and children.

"We keep the families together," Chesson said. "We keep them in a private setting."

Family Promise also aims to make the families feel like part of a community, which is why having local congregations take a hands-on approach is so important, Chesson said. Through those one-on-one interactions, she said, those serving and those being served often discover we're more alike than different.

### The U-Turn program

Along with the shelter program, Family Promise also has a handful of programs aimed at helping homeless youths. The fastest growing of those, currently with 40 local churches and their congregations, is the U-Turn program.

U-Turn features a drop-in center that's open twice a week for homeless youths to stop by and get access to a variety of services. There's also a monthly potluck

dinner, usually hosted by a local church.

Many of the kids who stop by have truancy issues and are on the verge of dropping out of school, Palmer said. By opening their eyes to the help that's available and giving them a chance to chat with other teens walking similar paths, the hope is to keep them in school.

But it's not always easy reaching them.

"The first month or so, you might not even learn their real name," Palmer said. "It's about trust building."

It's also about ensuring that the kids have what they need to succeed. Education is the program's greatest focus, with work constantly being done to help overcome the hurdles homeless students face, Palmer said.

"If they're wondering where they're going to stay a night or what they're going to eat, it's hard to focus on education," he said.

Chesson and Palmer said homelessness, particularly youth homelessness, is a growing problem. Last year, Chesson said, Family Promise provided services of one kind or another to 600 people — and that's with a full-time staff of only three.

The problem is one that's found all over the county, not just in Reading, Palmer said. Chesson agreed, saying each year there are more than 4,000 evictions across the county.

A Family Promise program to assist with rent and utility bills gets hundreds of calls, Chesson added.

Chesson said job opportunity is a big factor in homelessness in Berks, in particular access to good-paying jobs. She said it takes a full-time job with a salary of \$17 an hour to cover the average two-bedroom apartment in the county.

There also need to be more affordable housing options, Chesson said, and better access to equitable education.

"We're talking about big things," she said. "But if we don't start talking about it at all levels, what is going to change? It's nothing we should just throw our hands up about and say, 'It's somebody else's problem' about."

Contact David Mekeel: 610-371-5014 or [dmekeel@readingeagle.com](mailto:dmekeel@readingeagle.com).

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