

Homelessness in a Rocky Mountain Colorado city—a growing problem

Dag Mossige
26 April 2000

The following article was submitted by a WSWS reader.

In Fort Collins, Colorado, a city of 109,100 people at the eastern base of the “Front Range” of the Rocky Mountains, the national trend of economic prosperity is highly visible. New housing construction and commercial expansion serve as clear indicators of the booming economy of the city, also the home of Colorado State University.

However, a more gloomy side of the national economic expansion also finds expression in Fort Collins and Larimer County, illustrating that economic growth often benefits the few. The number of homeless people and people in danger of losing their homes in Fort Collins continues to increase.

Joyce Whidden, director of the New Bridges day shelter and homeless center in Fort Collins, said she has experienced a moderate but marked increase in the number of people accessing the shelter. “We’ve had about 22,000 day uses this year. That’s 2,000 more than last year,” she said. According to Whidden, more and more people are struggling to keep up with rising rent and living expenses. “What we see is more local people. It’s a much bigger problem now than before.”

Currently, three homeless shelters are located in Fort Collins: The Mission, operated by Catholic Charities Northern, the Open Door Mission and New Bridges. The Comprehensive Homeless Action Team (CHAT), a network made up of these shelters and the nonprofit housing and counseling agency Neighbor to Neighbor, estimates the number of homeless people in Fort Collins to be around 3,000, or about 3 percent of the city’s population.

For years, Fort Collins and the surrounding area has consistently been rated as one of the best places to live in America by publications such as *Money* magazine.

Factors cited have been the environment, recreational opportunities and a strong economy.

However, accompanying this economic development has been a dramatic rise in living expenses. According to *Money* magazine, single family housing costs in the Fort Collins area increased 62 percent between 1992 and 1996, one of the highest increases for an area in the state. Figures from Larimer County show that wages grew only 9 percent during this period.

A report entitled “Consolidated Housing & Community Development Plan: 2000-2004,” due to be released in July by the City of Fort Collins Advance Planning Department, acknowledges the “severe shortage of permanent affordable housing in the community. The Housing Authority maintains long waiting lists.” Julie Love, executive director of the Fort Collins Housing Authority (FCHA), said that several people looking for affordable housing have been on a waiting list for over a year.

Julie Smith, program administrator of the Advance Planning Department, a federally funded program operating under the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), said of the housing shortage, “It remains a problem, and it certainly is not getting better.” Smith said that although Fort Collins has a prospering economy, the department has seen no reduction in the number of homeless persons. “We never know who they are, we only see the figures. But we see the numbers remain the same; they even grow. It’s not getting any better,” she said.

The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program provides federal dollars for the acquisition of land and buildings for affordable housing in the city. Jackie Davis, CDBG administrator of Advance Planning, commented, “The competition for funds is fierce. We never have enough money for anything.”

Davis said that there has been a change in the population of people seeking housing assistance. “We now see working people, regular people, who don’t have a chance [to afford housing] on minimum wages.” Affordable housing is defined as when a family pays no more than 30 percent of gross monthly income for rent and utilities.

Davis said that a person needs to work 90 hours a week in order to survive on minimum wages with the present housing situation. “People work, but it might not just be enough,” Davis said. “It may wake up the middle class when you realize your own children are going to have a problem.”

Beth Cross is assistant director of Neighbor to Neighbor, a local agency that provides extensive counseling on housing and related services to families and individuals in Larimer County. According to Cross, there is a wide gap between wages and the cost of housing in Fort Collins. “Even with a steady, regular job, for many the income is not sufficient,” she said.

Illustrative of the situation is the cost of daycare, Cross said. For a single mother with a child, daycare expenses may easily consume up to 40 percent of her budget. The largest group seeking the assistance of Neighbor to Neighbor are families with children.

Cross believes a lot of the homeless population in Fort Collins is hidden. “A lot of people live in overcrowded situations with friends and family. I believe this number is equal to, if not bigger than, the number of people living in the shelters,” she said.

According to Cross, Fort Collins has lost much of its affordable housing stock. In 1996, a mobile home park was shut down to give way to commercial development, and 200 homeowners were left to fend for themselves. Following a flood in Fort Collins in 1997, 120 more mobile and trailer homes were lost.

The decrease in affordable housing has continued as subsidized housing has been bought up by for-profit organizations. Cross said that once an affordable housing unit is lost it cannot be replaced, because of the spiraling costs of landed property in the county. Cross said that ever-broader segments of the population—such as nontraditional students, people working at hospitals or in the school system—struggle with this constant decrease in housing stock, as the waiting lists for affordable housing keeps getting longer. “My philosophy is that homelessness is a symptom of the

problem,” Cross said. “It is not the problem itself.”

Chad Sebern is the coordinator of the Hope Job Bank, a job referral service provided by the Catholic Charities Northern, which runs the homeless shelter The Mission. The job bank deals with some homeless people as well as people at risk of becoming homeless. Sebern said, “We advocate higher wages for these workers. But when you look at the competing workforce in Fort Collins, one can see how hard it is.”

In the first quarter of 2000, the bank provided 194 day labor jobs for 298 applicants, as well as 31 steady jobs. However, Sebern said employers would often draw from the pool of highly educated students available in Fort Collins. Students are often more flexible when it comes to both working hours and wages, as they tend to use the job merely to supplement their income. “For other people, these kinds of jobs don’t pay enough to make a living,” he said.

Gloria Bogans has worked as a volunteer for The Mission homeless shelter for six years. She said the experience as a relief worker has served as an eye-opener in her view of the homeless. “Many people tend to think of them as alcoholics, as work-shy individuals,” Bogans said. “Then you come down here and realize the diversity of the crowd. They are anything from third graders to PhD students.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact