

Homeless shelters overflowing in small Wisconsin city

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The deepening economic crisis finds expression in the entirely preventable condition of homelessness for hundreds of millions of working people the world over. Smaller cities and towns in the Midwestern United States have not escaped this scourge of destitution and poverty.

The *Leader-Telegram* reported July 25 that the city of Eau Claire in western Wisconsin, population 65,883, finds that its homeless shelters have been overwhelmed with demand for beds and food as the crisis deepens. Kelly Christianson, executive director of Beacon House, which houses homeless families in the downtown area, confirmed to this reporter that they are compelled routinely to turn away five to twenty families nightly. Beacon House has six small apartment units in one building.

“Most of our families are comprised of a single mother with one or two children,” Christianson said. “Eau Claire lost most of its manufacturing jobs years ago. This is a service industry town with mostly low paying jobs.” She pointed out that standard rents for apartments and homes have been beyond the means of a single paycheck for working people for years.

“The problems of homelessness around here actually seemed to worsen before the economic crisis of 2008,” she explained. “We also shelter mentally ill persons often. Of course they are depressed, since they are in a depressing situation. But we also see the severely mentally disabled.”

Services have been severely cut back services for the mentally disabled, contributing to the homelessness crisis among this section of the population. The post-World War II attack on America’s working population dates back at least to the 1950s, with the country’s ruling elite anxious to begin the clawing back of gains conceded during working class struggles of the first

half of the 20th century.

Known today as asset stripping of public wealth, the so-called deinstitutionalization movement that closed publicly owned, long-term residential mental health hospitals dates from this period, and continues unabated. From 2009 to 2011, Wisconsin and Illinois ranked in the top 10 states that sustained funding cuts for chronic inpatient and outpatient mental health care. For example, Mayor Rahm Emmanuel oversaw the closing of six public mental health clinics in Chicago in 2012 alone.

The American Conference of Mayors in 2005 also pointed to “redevelopment and gentrification” of vast neighborhoods in major and most mid-sized cities, as the wealthiest layers sought to banish visibility of workers and the poor and swell their bank accounts with larger rents. The Conference of Mayors also noted that the demand for urgent shelter rose 13 percent in 2001 and 25 percent in 2005 in 270 US cities. Over a fifth of those urgently needing shelter were turned away for lack of resources and rooms, a situation exacerbated by the current recessionary downturn.

Sojourner House shelters homeless adults, also in downtown Eau Claire. Executive Director Dan Robinson reported that the number of women, and especially elderly women, was increasing. Some are departing abusive relationships, others have lost a spouse to sickness and death, and others have lost the assets of their life’s labors due to medical bills and home foreclosures. Many have ongoing medical problems and diminished mental reserves as they struggle to pay for housing and other basic necessities.

Robinson told WSWs, “Jobs are a huge factor. Young people have to live together to pay their expenses, then get into an argument with an apartment roommate, get kicked out, and have no money, no job,

and no place to go.”

Robinson said that he is aware of human beings attempting to survive in parking ramps, abandoned cars, and abandoned homes and commercial buildings during the harsh days and nights of the Midwestern winter.

He also reported that on the coldest nights some people resort to boarding a bus to a casino 50 miles away and spend the night riding back and forth. Desperate for warmth to survive, some also spend the night walking shopping corridors at the Eau Claire Walmart. To avoid freezing to death in January, people warm themselves in hospital lobbies by posing as family members of inpatients.

According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, about 3.5 million persons are homeless in a given year, about 1 percent of the US population. In any given week, approximately 842,000 are homeless in America. Families with children are the fastest growing category, accounting for about a fifth. Half are single men, a quarter single women, and 5 percent are children that are alone.

Almost 40 percent report mental health problems, and almost a fifth carry a diagnosis of serious mental illness. Half have a chronic health problem requiring regular attention, and 55 percent have no access to health care at all. The majority report being chronically hungry without access to sufficient survival calories each day. Hundreds of thousands of mortgage-defrauded families were also thrown onto the streets when US housing valuation collapsed in 2007, receiving not even symbolic relief from the Obama administration.

Another homeless shelter sponsor in Eau Claire called Western Dairyland operates four apartment-like residences where families can stay for a period as they deal with personal crises and search for work.

A program manager for Western Dairyland, Jeanne Semb, told the *Leader-Telegram* that her organization had been compelled to turn away 633 persons needing emergency shelter in 2012 for lack of room. “We have a wait list right now that is several families long,” she said. “We’re seeing more people all the time it seems.”

These conditions are the result of a conscious public policy. When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, federal funds amounted to 22 percent of larger city budgets. By 1989, federal aid to cities comprised

only 6 percent of revenue. Overall, federal spending that supported local governments fell 60 percent. Federal low-income housing subsidies fell between 1980 and 1989 from \$74 billion to \$19 billion, thereby drastically shrinking the stock of affordable housing for the working poor.

Around the country, in cities and towns large and small, shelters and soup kitchens scrambled to meet the increased demand for emergency housing and food for the rising unemployed and poor. By the year 2011, New York City’s homeless shelters housed 113,552 persons, including over 40,000 children, a 37 percent increase in nine years.

Los Angeles and San Francisco are thought to have the largest populations of destitute persons. On any given night in LA, over 51,000 people are without shelter. At least one night a year, an estimated 100,000 people in the city will be without a roof over their heads. According to the Homeless Action Network, the city of Detroit, which filed for bankruptcy last month, counted more than 19,000 homeless men, women and children in 2011.



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