

Chicago suburbs confront rising homelessness

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Now ten months into a state budget impasse, social services in Illinois are crumbling through attrition. The shrinking of services has placed the state's most vulnerable populations, including a growing number of homeless adults and children, in serious danger.

Republican Governor Bruce Rauner's recently proposed state budget includes a \$1.4 billion cut to the State Medicaid program, including services for children; an \$88 million cut to mental health services; a \$35 million cut to community substance abuse programs; and elimination of Homeless Youth Services and Supportive Housing Services. Each of these programs directly benefit workers who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

These cuts come in addition to the de facto cuts that have been made over the last year to services that prevent homelessness, such as affordable housing and health care services, due to the budget impasse.

Without a budget to allocate funding, state-run social programs have had to significantly cut their spending, resulting in the diminished provision of services. Moreover, the social crisis created by the breakdown of the global capitalist system in 2008, which state policymakers are pushing onto the backs of working people, is developing in a context of three decades of wage and industry decline in the region.

Even in the wealthier areas outside of Chicago homelessness is on the rise. The suburban counties of Dupage, Lake, and McHenry have a relatively high median household income of approximately \$76,000 per year. However, the lack of affordable housing, high unemployment figures, and stagnant wages all point to a crisis that is expressed not in the least by the increasing figures of homelessness, especially in families with young children.

Waukegan, an industrial town north of Chicago in Lake County, where more than 13 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty line, has

seen a significant rise in the number of people living in homeless shelters.

After local business owners complained to the Waukegan city council about panhandling by homeless in the city, Waukegan Mayor Wayne Motley suspended the operating license of a shelter on April 4, forcing all residents of the shelter, including an 80-year-old woman, onto the street in frigid temperatures.

Motley, a former cop, revoked the shelter's license after visiting in person. According to reports, he gave no indication during his time there that the shelter's license was in jeopardy. The shelter was later reopened on appeal.

The shelter was operated by PADS, Public Action to Deliver Shelter, which operates shelters and services for the homeless in the Chicagoland area. In late 2015 a PADS homeless shelter at St. Anastasia Church in Waukegan was closed at a time when need had reached an all-time high.

According to the PADS Lake County organization, the overall demand for shelter in October 2015 had increased by about 40 percent in comparison to recent years. In January 2016 homelessness in the county was reported to be at an all-time high since 2010, based on PADS statistics and a count conducted by Lake County Board members.

McHenry County, which borders Lake County to the west, has reported a 51 percent increase in demands for shelter services since 2009, according to that county's PADS shelter.

Dupage County, west of Chicago, has reported similarly rising rates of homelessness over the past few years. The number of families who sought shelter in 2015 increased by 38 percent, and the number rose by 13 percent for individuals.

An appalling number of children are homeless in the counties surrounding Chicago with children comprising the majority of the homeless population, according to

the most recently available reports.

Point-in-time counts of the homeless in Lake County last year revealed that 66 percent of those counted as homeless on a given night are under the age of 18, and the same count in Dupage County showed that 62 percent of the homeless population was below the age of 18.

Moreover the average age of a homeless person in Dupage County was 8 years, according to Bridge Communities, a local organization that serves the homeless. The National Center on Family Homelessness has tracked a sharp increase in homeless children in Illinois. In 2015, 98,212 statewide were counted compared with 75,443 in 2010.

This number coincides with the rising number of students reporting homelessness in these counties in the years since 2008. Students who reported homelessness in the 2012-2013 school year increased by more than 35 percent in Dupage and Lake Counties and more than 20 percent in McHenry County, when compared to the 2010-2011 school year.

In the years since 2010, the Democratic-controlled state government defunded mental health services by \$113.7 million, and closed two major residential treatment facilities and tens of regional outpatient clinics, leaving those with mental health crises to hospital emergency rooms and to the police. Only two other states—California and New York—have cut more from mental health services in the same time period, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The pain and suffering caused by mental illness makes it difficult for individuals to hold down a job and find stable housing. Mentally ill people that cannot get the treatment needed for their conditions are at a high risk of becoming homeless. McHenry County reported a 33 percent increase of homeless individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses since 2009.

Rising rents and cost of living, as well as high rates of unemployment, are also contributing to the climbing homeless rates in the region. The fair-market rent for the area, a figure calculated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban development, is set at \$922 per month for a one bedroom apartment and \$1,093 per month for a two-bedroom apartment. This would require an individual or a family to work anywhere from 75 to 89 hours per week at the Illinois State minimum wage of \$8.25 per hour in order to be able to

afford housing.

While the fair-market rent figures have increased every year, on average, since 2008, wages have remained stagnant. Twenty-five percent of Illinois households spend more than half their income on rent. The unemployment rate in this area is higher than the official national average of 4.9 percent, with counties reporting rates of anywhere from 5.5 to 6.9 percent.

The reality of the disintegration of living standards for the working class in the suburbs stands in stark contrast to the fact that it is home to a number of major corporations and Fortune 500 company headquarters that report significant profits year after year, such as McDonald's Corporation (Dupage), AbbVie (Lake), and Abbott Laboratories (Lake).



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