

A surge in Minnesota of homeless elderly

Gary Joad
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According to interviews broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio earlier this month, “alarm bells are going off around the state,” over the surge of older persons entering homeless shelters both in the urban and rural areas.

Sue Koesterman, pastor and executive director of Churches United for the Homeless shelter in Moorhead, Minnesota told MPR’s Dan Gunderson, “I think we are beginning to see the wave. It offends me as a pastor that someone who is at end of life should have to receive hospice care (for example) in a dorm of a homeless shelter. To me, that’s just offensive to my sense of human dignity.”

Persons over the age of 55 are the smallest grouping of homeless in the state. However, across Minnesota, older people are the fastest growing demographic without a permanent address, according to the Wilder Foundation which has been performing a “point-in-time” one day counting of homeless people every 3 years since 1991.

According to the Wilder Foundation’s 2015 report, the number of Minnesota’s homeless persons 55 to 80 years old has increased by 45 percent since the last survey done in 2012. The latest single day survey counted 9,312 adults, youth, and children without a permanent address, including 843 over the age of 55, comprising 9 percent of the homeless population in Minnesota.

Koesterman told MPR that, absent a political commitment to reverse the trend, matters are going to get much worse. Minnesota’s Republican controlled legislature, in its most recent session, did not even give a hearing to a proposal to allow financing for affordable senior housing. The Trump administration has unmistakably signaled its intention to abolish grants for the funding of lower cost housing for senior citizens.

A housing case worker of Detroit Lakes in western Minnesota, James McKinstra, told MPR that he is seeing a steady increase in homeless seniors across several rural counties. McKinstra reported about a third of his clients have been homeless before, but that two-thirds have never seen the problem.

“If they’ve never experienced homelessness and

they’re in their 60’s or 70’s, it’s just a huge shock to their system and they don’t know how to respond.”

The statistics for elder homelessness are likely an underestimation, according to McKinstra. Elders sleep unaccounted for as guests on friends’ couches, or run up bills in motels, or live in abandoned trailer homes.

Betty Hanson, 73, could not afford rent in the Detroit Lakes apartment market at \$800 to \$1000 with her small Social Security check. For some years, she lived with her children or rented only a room in homes, essentially living out of her suitcase until finally she ran out of resources and had no place to go. McKinstra found her a one bedroom apartment in Detroit Lakes with a sliding scale rent.

Maxfield Research performed a study for a housing consortium and projected that by 2020 there will be another 23,000 affordable housing units needed for Minnesota seniors. For low-income elderly, affordable housing might be no more than \$400, according to Barbara Day of Washington County Community Development Agency. Rents are two to three times that in Minnesota.

Investment developers in the hunt for profits are disinterested in building affordable housing for low-income seniors.

Wendy Boppert, program manager for the downtown St. Paul Dorothy Day shelter, reported to the *Pioneer Press* that one night in the 2015-2016 winter they housed eight women over the age of 75, all of them homeless for the first time.

David Evansen, a 68-year-old Vietnam War veteran, reported that he lives off of a wheeled walker that he can sit on. He has leg numbness, a spinal injury, an ankle needing surgery, and a very large hernia, all of which require medical attention and several medications that he must take daily. He is VA eligible for an electric scooter, but he told *Twin Cities News* that he cannot receive it without a permanent address.

Evansen retired from the US Postal Service in 2000, and owned a condo for his later years. Then he divorced after

retirement, lost all of his assets, and found himself homeless. For a while he moved around between shelters, then he moved in with his daughter until conflicts with her boyfriend compelled him to move out.

Patricia McArdle, Catholic Charities director for elder services pointed out, “With our currently limited social safety net, anybody could become homeless.”

McArdle added, “You’d be amazed how many people we see here who would never have dreamed that this could happen to them because they’ve always been able to take care of themselves. We have people in here who have master’s degrees, were nurses, worked for the state, and they were able to stay on their feet.” And then suddenly, they could not.

The Dorothy Day Center of St. Paul director Gerry Lauer reported that some of his clients have not seen a primary care physician in years, have not had new glasses for a decade, and cannot read forms or signs because of changed vision.

The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) confirms that health problems are dramatically worsened by deep poverty and homelessness. Such experiences rapidly age the person, such that a 50-year-old will appear to be closer to age 70.

Homeless persons have great difficulty in obtaining proper medications, and often have no secure storage for prescriptions, such as insulin for diabetes needing refrigeration. Taking medications correctly is all the more difficult when a person is occupied with finding a meal and a safe and warm place to sleep, to wash, and to use a toilet. Dental care is often absent entirely.

Of course, homeless persons suffer depression, and not infrequently dementia. As McArdle told the *Pioneer Press*, “Complications get worse. They begin to snowball. If you didn’t have a mental health condition before you were homeless, you will afterwards.”

From 2009 to 2015, Minnesota homelessness rose 6 percent. Another one day count revealed 10,214 persons without a permanent address, including 3,500 children. On the same count, about 1,000 youth 18-21 years old were on their own, and 146 teens age 17 and under were destitute. In the same time period, people using Minnesota homeless shelters rose 27 percent. Youth 21 and under comprised 46 percent of the homeless. Two parent families without shelter increased 22 percent, and children in emergency shelters rose 44 percent.

Adults over age 55 comprise over 8 percent of the homeless, and increased 48 percent between 2009 and 2015. The so-called baby boomers born between 1955 and

1965 were uniquely positioned to take the severe hit of the 2008 Great Recession, often being at an age just before eligibility for Medicare and Social Security.

The NCH reported in 2009 that there were nine senior citizens awaiting affordable housing for every one unit available, and that the wait time then was from 3-5 years.

Any subsequent economic recovery from the recession was completely meaningless for persons in deep poverty, defined as persons at or below one half of the federally defined poverty level. The NCH reports that the likelihood that a very poor elderly person can regain income by returning to employment or by way of marriage becomes ever more unlikely.

The NCH also notes that the elderly homeless have a great deal more trouble getting around, are more distrustful of shelters and clinics, often have difficulty climbing stairs to upper floor shelters, as well as standing in long lines for beds and showers.

Elderly homeless are far more prone to crime victimization, and are often ignored by the police when they are in trouble. In 2006, 27 percent of homeless crime victims were 50-59 years old.

Many more homeless people die before the age of 62. A 2007 study of seven cities in North America and Europe found homeless people three to four times more likely to die prematurely than the general population. Average life expectancy without permanent housing was found in the cities studied to be 42 to 52 years, caused principally by worsened and unattended medical conditions.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the number of elderly persons who are homeless in the US will have doubled by 2050. At least 44,172 elderly Americans were homeless in 2010, that number is expected to increase by at least 33 percent to 58,772 by 2020, and is projected to double by 2050 to 95,000.



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