

Traverse City officials intensify homeless crisis in northwest Michigan

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Northwest lower Michigan has a severe homelessness crisis, a blatant symptom of a capitalist system that prioritizes profits over the fundamental human right to affordable housing. While local officials have offered trivial, insufficient reforms, the intensifying crisis points to the fact that only a revolutionary transformation of society can truly eradicate homelessness.

The northwest region of Michigan's lower peninsula, encompasses areas along Lake Michigan's shoreline and extending inland. Traverse City is the major city in this area, often considered the region's cultural and economic center.

Statistics show the depth of the homelessness emergency and its connection to the growth of economic inequality. In 2004, the vacancy rate in the area plummeted to 0.7 percent, sharply contrasting the national average that varies between 4-7 percent. The scarcity of housing is exacerbated by the spread of short-term rentals, which erode the housing supply and inflate costs.

An average residence in Charlevoix and Leelanau counties, for example, costs \$1 million, and even the median home is priced at \$400,000. This appalling cost, compared to the low wages paid in the region's tourism, hospitality and retail industries, causes staff to be systematically priced out of the area.

Sarah Hughes, Homeless Prevention Programs Director at Northwestern Michigan Community Action Network (NMCAN), bluntly stated: "There's just nobody up here who wants those jobs because they can't afford to live here."

The region's homeless population is devastated by the consequences of the housing crisis. Across 10 counties in northwest lower Michigan, only two shelters provide limited refuge against harsh Michigan

winters, leaving countless individuals vulnerable and without access to transportation and vital resources.

Yarrow Brown, executive director of Housing North, states the obvious: "We just have a sheer lack of number of available units for the different price points people need, especially those experiencing homelessness who are on the lower end of the income spectrum."

Homelessness was once considered an exclusively urban problem, but it has infiltrated rural areas across the country, exposing many of the deep-seated flaws of capitalism. Northwest Michigan has experienced an even steeper increase than the national average, which surged 4 percent between 2022 and 2023.

A report from Michigan's Campaign to End Homelessness revealed that between 2021 and 2022, homelessness in the Grand Traverse Bay area rose by a shocking 56 percent, the largest increase statewide. Homeless individuals not only face the emotional burden of societal invisibility, but also the grim reality of fighting for basic survival against brutally cold Michigan winters with severely limited support.

The widening gap between low incomes and high housing prices illustrates the accelerating economic exploitation forcing families onto the streets. The median home price in Grand Traverse County in 2023 was approximately \$390,000, yet the median income would only support a home costing \$329,000.

This alarming trend is also reflected in national statistics. In January 2023, 653,104 people experienced homelessness on one single night across the United States, an increase of over 12 percent from 2022. The homelessness crisis has worsened every year since 2016, underscoring the capitalist system's profound failure to care for its most vulnerable citizens.

The proposed "solutions" by Michigan lawmakers

have also proved terrifically inadequate. The Michigan Bill of Rights for the Homeless, introduced in July 2023, purports to protect the homeless from discrimination and ensure access to essential services. Yet it fails to confront the root causes of homelessness: income inequality, unaffordable housing, and the lack of universal healthcare. Such legislation is merely a superficial fix for a deeply systemic problem.

Actions recently taken by local authorities further demonstrate their contempt for the unhoused. While the Northwestern Michigan Community Action Agency expanded its street outreach to those beyond their typical range, Hughes noted that many “are going to die on the street because nobody knows they’re out there.”

In May, Traverse City commissioners made a ruthless decision. Having just approved Safe Harbor, a local emergency shelter, to operate year-round, they then heartlessly cleared “The Pines,” a large homeless encampment, while enforcing their new no-camping ordinance.

While city officials claimed that displaced individuals from The Pines would be housed in shelters, the reality is that the area’s two overnight shelters, Safe Harbor (74 beds) and The Goodwill Inn (120 beds) are routinely at capacity, having to regularly turn away up to five people every night.

Hannah Wescott, director of Jubilee House (a day-only shelter), struggles whether or not to provide the homeless with camping supplies, knowing it may violate the city’s inhumane ordinance. Wescott stated:

There are plenty of folks who are sleeping outside, but they need to be able to pick up and go quickly so that they don’t violate any ordinances while they’re trying to survive.

This forces residents to retreat further from public view and away from essential resources.

A four-year resident of The Pines until its demolition, James Patton, articulated widespread desperation, stating: “I don’t have a place to stay.” Large encampments like The Pines often house up to 100 residents for several years. The Pines facilitated collaborative efforts among homelessness prevention services to devise solutions for homelessness.

The Northwestern Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness’s goal of achieving zero chronically homeless people by 2028 is becoming increasingly unattainable given the city’s punitive policies. “If we don’t figure out the solution for the 70 folks (chronically homeless), the numbers are just going to get bigger and bigger and bigger because our resources get stretched more and more and more,” warned coalition director Ashley Halladay-Schmandt. This challenge is particularly evident in affluent Traverse City, where over 500 public school students are currently experiencing homelessness.

Michigan’s program to update outdated zoning laws and Goodwill Northern Michigan’s recent purchase of East Bay Flats, which will be converted into affordable housing, are positive initiatives, but they are insufficient to address a crisis rooted from fundamental economic inequalities.

The crisis of homelessness will not be solved by incremental reforms. It demands a fundamental socio-economic restructuring and the establishment of a socialist society to ensure that housing is a basic right and not a commodity to be bought and sold for profit.



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