

A portrait of the homeless in CNY

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By Delen Goldberg
Staff writer

Young, old. Male, female. Black, white.

There's no one face of Central New York's homeless, those who work with them say.

Some choose to sleep on the streets. Others seek refuge in shelters. A handful spend their time "couch surfing," moving from one friend or family member's sofa to another.

"We see all socioeconomic backgrounds, all ethnic groups, all ages, for a variety of reasons," said Tom Lis, a case manager for Onondaga Case Management's Homeless Program. Reasons "could be anything from employment issues to mental illness to no family support."

The recent death of a homeless Vietnam veteran helped focus attention on Central New York's homeless. George Ruggaber was found dead Christmas Eve in a stairwell on Syracuse's North Side.

Since then, city officials have razed a homeless village off Pearl Street, and police say a second may follow. Officers are considering tearing down an encampment near the Herald Place offramp of Interstate 690 after National Grid workers complained about the behavior of the tent city's residents.

Recent news reports have focused much attention on Syracuse's unsheltered population, but many types of homeless live in the region.

To get a better sense of those people and their needs, service providers fan out each year to count and categorize all the homeless they can find, in shelters and on the streets, during a 24-hour period. Head counts this year are planned for today in Onondaga and Cayuga counties.

Here's a look at some of the types of people in Central New York's homeless population: The mentally ill

Schizophrenia and depression abound in the homeless community, according to Charley Rhoades, a client care specialist at the Rescue Mission. And mental illness often leads to substance abuse.

"A lot of times, it's because they lost the means (to pay) for medication, so they are self-medicating," Rhoades said. "Medications can be \$25 a pill, so they turn to something else they can get cheaper."

Lis, of Onondaga Case Management, and his co-worker, Andrew Steele, said they found a psychotic man living alone last year in a tent city on the shore of Onondaga Lake, near Carousel Center. He had erected half a dozen tents, using each for a different purpose: a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen.

While his set-up was elaborate, the man was ill-prepared to deal with the elements. He survived by drinking dirty lake water, Lis said, and made no preparations for winter.

"He believed God had given him the power to stop winter," Lis said. "He also thought he had an enzyme that made the lake water OK to drink."

The man suffered violent bouts of vomiting, Lis said, and eventually abandoned his encampment when winter

arrived and snow crushed his tents. Veterans

The majority of homeless veterans more than 70 percent struggle with mental health and/or substance abuse problems, said Frank Ernenwein, coordinator for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center's Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program.

"They have been affected in combat and may have post-traumatic stress disorder," Ernenwein said. "Many of the veterans from Vietnam really didn't ask for services until many years later. A lot of the (homeless) veterans we see now are estranged from their families and have been separated from their children for many years."

While many veterans shun outreach services, a large number seek help from veterans' agencies and homeless shelters.

Navy veteran Chuck Fregin, 50, of Syracuse, has been living at the Rescue Mission for more than a month. He moved into the shelter after suffering a stroke and being asked to leave his girlfriend's apartment, he said.

"I needed to get away before things got really bad," Fregin said. "I had nowhere to turn."

Fregin said he sees his current predicament as a blessing in disguise. After receiving help from Rescue Mission case workers, he is set to begin a job Thursday with Murbro Parking and hopes to move out of the shelter soon.

"I'm basically here until I can get back on my feet financially and get my own place," Fregin said. People with HIV/AIDS

More than a quarter of the people served last year by case managers at AIDS Community Resources were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, said Rick Priebe, director of support services.

Five percent of clients last year lived on the street or in an emergency shelter, Priebe said. An additional 5 percent lived in transitional housing. Another 24 percent told outreach workers they were staying temporarily with friends or relatives.

"A significant number of the people we provide services to, whether they are homeless or not, usually have other problems," Priebe said. "Most frequently, it's substance abuse and mental health issues, and in an awful lot of cases, it's both. Those factor into the risky behaviors that got them AIDS and the conditions that cause them to be homeless."

Priebe said the majority of infected homeless people his agency sees are men. Victims of domestic abuse

While most homeless victims of domestic abuse are women or children, staff at Vera House say about 5 percent of their clients are men.

Most, male or female, find themselves homeless only after they leave their abuser. "More than likely, they don't have friends or family that can take them in," said Cynthia Hunter, Vera House's co-coordinator of shelter services. "Or the abuser tends to be violent, so friends or family fear not only for (the victim) but for their own family's safety."

Staff at Vera House help clients prepare a safety plan for themselves to keep them out of dangerous relationships and, hopefully, off the streets.

Victims of domestic abuse seek shelter more often than do other types of homeless because they tend to be women and children who fear living on the street. Runaways About 400 people under the age of 21 stayed last year in shelters run by the Salvation Army, said Tom Roshau, the agency's director of youth services.

The group was evenly split between younger teens and older young adults, Roshau said. Males comprised about 60 percent of clients.

"Folks might be more willing to take in a girl than a boy," Roshau said.

Young people can end up in shelters because they run away from home or get kicked out by their parents, something Roshau says is happening more frequently. Some homeless teens have parents who themselves are homeless, Roshau said, while others come from affluent households.

A large percentage of homeless youth don't use shelters at all. Teens tend to hide out in vacant buildings or jump from couch to couch rather than seek help at a shelter.

Last year, the Salvation Army helped 200 young people living temporarily with friends or family, in addition to the 400 it sheltered.

Roshau recalled one teenage boy who lived in his car for several weeks while trying to finish a semester at school.

"If they can get one more night at their friend's house, they'll take it," Roshau said. "It's only when they hit bottom, when they say, 'No one else in the community wants to help me out,' that they'll call the Salvation Army."