

Combating homeless problem a priority

Community partners come together to work on a plan

Housing

By **Jacob Vitali**

j.vitali@lowellsun.com

Lowell » Homelessness and housing insecurity is not just a Lowell problem, it's a regional problem — and addressing it is going to take the community coming together and working as a team.

That's the message of Community Teamwork Inc., the Lowell Plan, the Greater Lowell Community Foundation and the Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce, which have come together to launch a campaign aimed at bringing public awareness to the issue. With an unprecedented amount of federal funding available to communities, they say now is the time to address it.

“ We know that there is a crisis today, and an even bigger crisis that affects our economy, our way of living and people's lives,” CTI CEO Karen Frederick said at a Wednesday meeting with The Sun editorial board.

According to a survey conducted by CTI, housing is the No. 1 issue in

Homeless » 5a

Homeless

FROM PAGE 1A

Lowell, Billerica, Chelmsford and Tewksbury. It's the second biggest issue in Dracut and Westford, and the third in Tyngsboro.

The four organizations coming together is part of a larger effort to address homelessness head on. In the coming weeks, the partners intend to sit down with local municipal and housing officials to impress upon them the need to address housing from a regional perspective.



community teamwork inc. ceo karen Frederick discusses housing with members of the sun's editorial board on thursday.

Jacob Vitali / lowell sun

S. Interagency Council on Homelessness estimates a chronically homeless person can cost taxpayers as much as \$ 30,000 to \$ 50,000 annually.

Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Danielle McFadden added that when subsidies to house people at area motels run out, it could impact someone's employment. Businesses are already having a difficult time attracting employees, she said.

In addition to building more housing, the partners acknowledge that there is a component of people not making a living wage in order to afford housing.

Frederick said CTI had spent years advocating, for instance, to get early childhood education professionals

Part of those conversations will be breaking down the stigma surrounding what homelessness looks like.

“ They’re young people, they go to college. They’re at Middlesex (Community College) and UMass Lowell. They’re people who are seniors — there is a rising population of seniors who are experiencing homelessness,” Frederick said.

And just because somebody is homeless, doesn’t mean that they aren’t contributing to society, Frederick and Greater Lowell Community Foundation CEO and President Jay Linnehan said.

“ There’s a bunch of people not only from the hotels that go to work, but from their car or from their tent, that go to work every single day, trying to make ends meet. Part of it is, how do we get a roof over their head?” Linnehan said.

A part of the work CTI is trying to do is to keep people from being on the streets in the first place, especially young people.

“If you can prevent them from being on the streets, their chance of having a better life goes up exponentially. It’s amazing. The data is there and it’s really clear,” Frederick said.

According to the partners, it is difficult to get a number of how many people are homeless. Any number given would likely not include people who are “couch surfing,” in carceral settings or treatment programs or people who are “ well hidden” and living in places like a car in a driveway, an illegal unit or a remote camp.

In addition to people who are homeless, Linnehan said it’s important to not lose sight of the people on the verge of becoming homeless. He said that includes people living paycheck to paycheck or who could be impacted by a bad car accident, losing their job, getting sick or even having their hot water heater fail.

“ Now we know that people congregate in the cities when they have no money,” Frederick said. “ Because there’s services in the city, even though there’s nowhere near enough. They think there’s more housing there or there’s more affordable housing there.”

Frederick added that people come from “every single corner, in every single community.”

Part of the issue is a lack of housing stock, especially affordable housing. CTI has been looking to start

paid at a comparable rate to public school teachers. She said businesses are struggling to find employees and part of it is also families not being able to afford childcare.

“ It’s on every businessperson’s lips today because they can’t find employees, because they don’t have any childcare. So it’s all connected. I believe we also have to tackle that issue as the kind of agency we are,” Frederick said.

During the pandemic, CTI had to close its childcare division for two months. In those two months, Frederick received calls from employers who had frontline employees that couldn’t come to work because childcare services weren’t available. It stressed the importance of having those support services available and also having them be affordable.

Frederick said the general rule is that 30% of a person or family’s income should be spent on housing, while 7% should be spent on childcare services.

According to CTI data, 55% of people in Lowell, 53% in Dracut and 51% in Tewksbury are paying more than 30% of their income on housing.

Linnehan added that for people looking to receive benefits from the federal government, the math works against them. Federal benefits are calculated off of the federal minimum wage of \$ 7.25 per hour. As of January, the minimum wage in Massachusetts is \$ 14.25 per hour.

Because there is a \$ 7 difference, many Massachusetts residents are determined to be ineligible because the federal government does not see them as a minimum wage worker.

Enterprise Editor Alana Melanson contributed to this report.

remediating the situation with 300 housing units.

Frederick said with rental assistance funding ending and in the wake of the pandemic, more work is still going to be needed.

The four partners also want to work with private housing developers directly and encourage them to build units that are available to those in need.

“ If we’re able to work with a developer that is open to housing some of the individuals, say, coming out of the hotel, they’re going to have access to the team at CTI and other agencies that have been working together prior to this,” said Allison Lamey, executive director of the Lowell Plan.

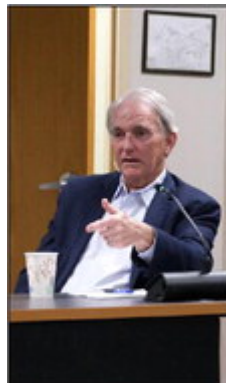
Linnehan added that the lack of housing was not an issue exclusive to Greater Lowell or Massachusetts, it is an issue across the country.

When people are housed, it can be a financial savings for communities, Frederick said. Less money is spent at the emergency room, on police and ambulance calls. She said the U.



allison Lamey, executive director of the Lowell Plan; danielle McFadden, cEo and president of the Greater Lowell chamber of commerce; and Greater Lowell community Foundation cEo and President Jay Linnehan discuss housing with members of the Sun’s Editorial Board on thursday.

JacoB VItaLI / LoWELL SUN



Greater Lowell community Foundation cEo and President Jay Linnehan discusses housing with members of the Sun’s Editorial Board on thursday.

JacoB VItaLI / LoWELL SUN