

Homelessness in Lowell



What's Available for Those Most in Need?

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Introduction

Becoming homeless is one of the most traumatic experiences anyone can survive. Losing your home, with no place to go, can make you feel helpless and vulnerable beyond belief. Having kids at the time can exacerbate the problem, and possibly create negative systemic change to your child's life and future hopes.

The reasons people become homeless are extremely complicated and vary among individual cases. Homelessness may be caused by economic forces, like losing a job or high healthcare costs because of an illness, or be related to domestic violence, eviction, incarceration, substance abuse, or mental illness. Some people are homeless for only short periods of time, others, considered chronically homeless, find themselves rotating through shelters, the street, friends' houses, or jail.¹

The social effects of homelessness can stigmatize people for life. According to a report titled "After Welfare Reform," written by a collaboration of public policy institutions at the University of Massachusetts Boston:

Families pay high stigma and transaction costs when they seek and use emergency services. Virtually all the people we spoke with who use emergency and public services commented on the personal and familial tolls it carries. They mentioned scornful public attitudes, stigmatization, lack of respect from welfare workers, intrusion into personal lives, loss of self-worth, and negative impacts on their children.²

The stigma experienced by the people interviewed for that report is very real. I started researching homelessness issues, and services for the homeless, in Lowell near the end of 2005. Since then, three homeless men were brutally injured or murdered in the region.

Scott Capella, a 30 year-old homeless man was set on fire in Langone Park in the North End of Boston.

1-City of Cambridge. "Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Cambridge," May 17, 2005, Pg. 5.

2-Frienman, Donna Haig, et al. "After Welfare Reform: Trends in Poverty and Emergency Service Use in Massachusetts," Center for Social Policy, John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, June 2001, Pg. 3.

Assailants first beat Scott a little after 2 in the morning. Then, shortly after, the assailants returned to pour lighter fluid on him and set him on fire.³

Trevor Sprague's body was found engulfed in flames beneath a bridge over Kenduskeag Stream in Bangor, Maine on March 7.⁴

Hermes Pena was beaten here in Lowell while searching for empty cans in trash bins. After spending a week in critical condition, Hermes died in the hospital in early March.⁵

All three of these tragic incidents happened within a month of each other.

Beating and killing the homeless and poor, sadly, isn't simply a local problem. On January 12, 2006, two teenagers were video taped beating and killing a homeless man with baseball bats in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In March 2006 three young men were filmed beating and kicking a homeless man sleeping at a bus stop in San Francisco, California.⁶

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, the number of assaults against the homeless has risen dramatically since 2002. In 2005, 73 homeless people were assaulted nationwide and 13 of them died.⁷ Since 1999, a total of 169 homeless people have been killed.⁸

In many cities in towns in it is nearly illegal to be homeless. City officials want to keep homelessness hidden to improve the public image of their downtowns. So, many cities have ordinances, like ones in Dallas, Texas, banning panhandling, "urban camping,"

3-Walker, Adrian. "Show how hateful it is," Boston Globe, March 30, 2006.

4-Associated Press. "Burning body ID'd as homeless man," Boston Globe, March 11, 2006.

5-Author Unknown. "Lowell beating victim dies," Lowell Sun, March 8, 2006.

6-Mehren, Elizabeth. "Maine Governor Signs Homeless-Protection Bill," L.A. Times, April 7, 2006.

7-Associated Press, "Homeless Man Set on Fire in Boston Park," Boston Globe, March 5, 2006.

8-Mehren, Elizabeth. "Maine Governor Signs Homeless-Protection Bill," LA Times, April 7, 2006.

and distributing food to the homeless except in designated areas.⁹

The Problem

The problem many homeless people face is misunderstanding. They are treated like criminals, when they in fact may be peaceful. They are called lazy and accused of not wanting to work, when in fact good paying jobs are few and far between. They are ignored, when it is important to give them the attention they need. It is this misunderstanding that leads to the senseless acts of violence and criminalization of the homeless I described above.

The Purpose

The purpose of this report is to tell the story of homelessness in Lowell. From this story, you will find many of the stereotypes of the homeless are merely myth. You will learn about the venerable work dozens of organization in Lowell are doing for those in need, along with the many challenges these organizations face.

The first section of this report will answer the question, “What is the level of homelessness in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the US?” Here we will try to break down some statistics on homelessness in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the entire US in a way that makes sense.

The second section answers the question, “What programs and organizations are already in place to help the homeless here in Lowell?” Here we will look at short descriptions of some of the organizations in Lowell and describe their programs.

The third section will answer the question, “What are the challenges the organizations in Lowell face?” After talking to a dozen or so organization in Lowell, a few themes started to surface. Here we will learn about how the stigmatization of the homeless effects local organizations, how the federal and local governments effect organizations, and how the local economy and housing market effects the level of homelessness

in Lowell.

My Hope

I hope is this report affects change. Not only change in the way many homeless people are viewed by society—but change in policy. I want you to better understand how the system in Lowell works. I want you to realize how much great work is going on here. But I also want you to realize a lot needs to be done—and hopefully that will make you want to work towards social change by helping many of the great organizations Lowell is lucky to have.

⁹-Associated Press. “Dallas Institutes New Laws on Homeless,” March 9, 2006.

Section 1

How Many Homeless People Live in Lowell?

Walking downtown, you may not notice many homeless people. According to Donna Hunnewell, founder of the Lowell Wish Project, “You rarely see a homeless person panhandling in Lowell despite having the second highest homeless population in Massachusetts.”¹ While homelessness in Lowell may be hidden, however, it is still an unsolved problem.

The Federal government requires the City of Lowell to count the number of homeless individuals and families in the city, plus the entire scope of services for them, in a yearly Continuum of Care Application. Organizations in Lowell, like shelters, soup kitchens, etc., work on the Continuum of Care application process and help to create an accurate count of the homeless population. The Federal government uses the information in the Application to determine the amount of money Lowell is qualified to receive.

The coalition of organizations in Lowell, working on the Continuum of Care application, found that there were 342 homeless people in Lowell in 2005. Of the 342 homeless persons 28 lived on the street, while the remaining 314 reside in either emergency shelters or transitional housing. Table 1.1 below breaks down the statistics further.

Table 1.1

Homeless Population	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	Unsheltered	Total
<i>Families with Children</i>	17	42	0	59
<i>Persons in Family with Children</i>	52	114	0	166
<i>Single Individuals</i>	97	51	28	176
Total Persons	149	165	28	342

Source: 2006 Continuum of Care Application for City of Lowell, page 17

The following table (Table 1.2) breaks the homeless population in Lowell into subpopulations.

1-Hunnewell, Donna. Email to Jeffrey Muckensturm on 12/12/05.

Table 1.2

Homeless Subpopulations	Total	% of Total
<i>Chronically Homeless</i>	110	32.16%
<i>Severely Mentally Ill</i>	101	29.53%
<i>Chronic Substance Abuse</i>	116	33.92%
<i>Veterans</i>	39	11.40%
<i>Persons with HIV/AIDS</i>	3	0.88%
<i>Victims of Domestic Violence</i>	98	28.65%
<i>Unaccompanied Youth</i>	112	32.75%

Source: 2006 Continuum of Care Application for City of Lowell, page 17

From these two tables, we find: Nearly half of all the homeless people in Lowell are families with children, one third are chronically homeless, about 29 percent are victims of domestic violence, and almost 30 percent have severe mental disabilities.

Keep in mind that poverty rates in Lowell are higher than that of Massachusetts as a whole. Of the 105,106 people living in Lowell, 17,066 people, or 16.8% of the population, live in poverty while Massachusetts has a 9.3% poverty rate.² Higher levels of poverty may lead to higher levels of homelessness.

What are the levels of homelessness in Massachusetts and the US?

According to a study by the Center for Social Policy at UMass-Boston, “An estimated 28,800 individuals were served in the state’s emergency homeless shelter system in 2003.”³

The National Coalition for the homeless reported

2-<http://www.nmcog.org/lowell.htm>

3-Center for Social Policy. “Hard Numbers, Hard Times: Homeless Individuals in Massachusetts Emergency Shelters, 1999-2003.”

that the number of homeless people in the US ranges from 2.5 million to 3.5 million people. Furthermore, their statistics also show that 1.35 million children are homeless in the US. The homeless population is approximately one percent of the total US population each year.⁴

Sadly, homeless levels are increasing, not decreasing, despite the president's effort to "end chronic homelessness." The United States Conference of Mayors release the "Hunger and Homelessness Survey" in late 2005. The survey included twenty-four cities in the US, and the results are interesting.⁵

For example, "During the past year, requests for emergency shelter increased in the survey cities by an average of 6 percent, with 71 percent of the cities registering an increase. Requests for shelter by homeless families alone increased by 5 percent, with 63 percent of the cities reporting an increase."⁶

The report also says the increase in homelessness has led to unmet demand for emergency housing and assistance. "An average of 14 percent of the requests for emergency shelter by homeless people overall and 32 percent of the requests by homeless families alone are estimated to have gone unmet during the last year. In 88 percent of the cities, emergency shelters may have to turn away homeless families due to lack of resources; in 79 percent they may also have to turn away other homeless people."⁷

So we find there is still a problem of homelessness in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the United States despite, as Donna Hunnewell put it, its seemingly hidden exposure. Luckily Lowell has amazing activists, advocates, and organizations providing desperately need housing and services for the homeless. The following section describes, in detail, some of those organizations in Lowell.

4-National Coalition for the Homeless. "How Many People Experience Homelessness?" June 2005.

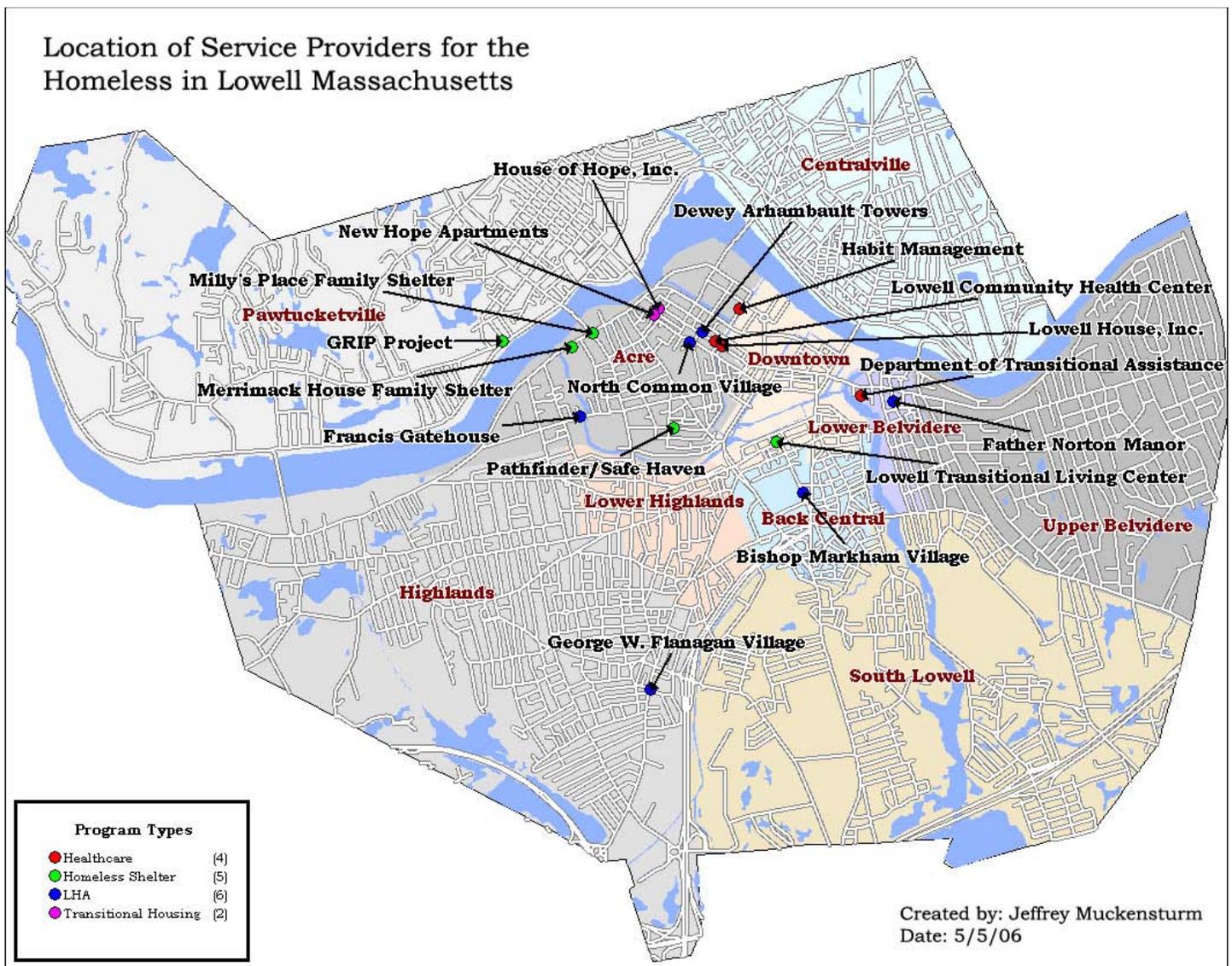
5-United States Conference of Mayors. "Hunger and Homelessness Survey," December 2005.

6-Ibid.

7-Ibid.

Section 2

What Programs are Available for the Homeless in Lowell?



Above is a map of Lowell with programs for the homeless marked and labeled. The red icons are organizations that provide healthcare to the homeless, such as Habit Management or the Lowell Community Health Center. The green icons are shelters, like the Lowell Transitional Living Center and Pathfinder. The blue icons are Lowell Housing Authority buildings that provide affordable units for those in need. Finally, the purple icons are transitional housing options, like House of Hope.

As you can see, there are a wide variety of services for the homeless in Lowell. For example, The Lowell Transitional Living Center (LTLC) provides room for up to 120 single men and women. Besides the shelter,

LTLC serves three meals a day, teaches GED classes, provides healthcare, and has twelve (12) single room occupancies.

Also, Pathfinder, Lowell's only day-shelter, operates a program for twelve (12) single men to help them get personally and financially stable. They also have a day shelter for people living on the street, washers and dryers, three free meals a day, healthcare services, help with signing up for government assistance, and showers.

Other transitional living organizations include: The GRIP Project, which is a shelter for teens and young adults; House of Hope, Inc. which operates two houses

for families in transition to permanent housing; and Community Teamwork, Inc. which operates two family shelters, Milly's Place and the Merrimack House, as well as a huge variety of programs to prevent homelessness from energy assistance to rental assistance.

Shelters in Lowell, and around the country, no longer simply provide a place to rest at night. Every organization in Lowell seeks to find permanent housing, job training, and healthcare options, for their residents through programs specific to the needs of their residents and clients.

How does each organization work with the homeless?

There is only one true homeless shelter in Lowell, the Lowell Transitional Living Center. However, there are dozens of organization in the city that work with the homeless. Lowell's latest Continuum of Care application lists sixty-nine (69) different organizations that work on prevention and outreach, or provide supportive services for the homeless.¹

Describing each of the sixty-nine organizations would be tremendously tedious and boring to read. So we will focus on four (4) of the most influential and interesting organizations in Lowell: The Lowell Transitional Living Center, Pathfinder, the GRIP Project, and Community Teamwork, Inc. After that, we will take a quick look at a few other important organizations in Lowell.

The Lowell Transitional Living Center²

LTLC, located in a large brick building they lease on Middlesex Street in Downtown, is currently the largest homeless shelter in Lowell—providing space for up to 90 single men and women in the summer, and 120 in the winter. Beds take up nearly every inch of the large, dingy, room as you first enter. Offices, located throughout the building's three floors, are filled with people taking classes, visiting a nurse, or working on

1-Continuum of Care. Super NOFA Application to HUD, April 2006.

2-The information for LTLC came from www.ltlc.org, and interviews with Kathy Treggiari, LTLC's then Executive Director, between February and May 2006.

projects. The men sleep upstairs, while the women sleep downstairs in the windowless basement.

At first glance the Center seems like a stereotypical shelter—Dozens of people are talking, reading, arguing, meeting, and working. However, the Center is much more because they recognize that many homeless people have complex problems that can only be solved with the help of supportive services. So, in addition to the shelter, LTLC provides:

- Breakfast, lunch, and dinner for residents of LTLC and members of the surrounding community.
- Case managers who develop service plans tailored to the specific needs of each resident.
- Outreach workers who engage the homeless living on the street.
- Mental health clinician who assesses and refers LTLT residents to mental health services.
- GED and computer classes, on site, five days a week.
- Rep-Payee Program, run by LTLC staff, to insure a client's bills are paid on time.
- Stipend program paying residents a wage for completing work around the shelter. Half of their wage is saved to help pay for an apartment.
- Two part-time nurses who provide health care for those who haven't seen a doctor in a long time.
- Detox coordinator who refers and provides transportation to detox treatment centers anywhere in Massachusetts.
- Daily AA meetings.
- Psychiatrist visits once a week.
- And podiatrist visits.

The focus of these services is to help the homeless transition into permanent living conditions. With the help of the Center's healthcare providers, job training, and substance abuse counseling, many shelter residents move to better living conditions.

LTLC's scope of services is impressive. In 2005, they served or housed:

- 80,872 meals in its kitchen (That is 222 meals a day).
- 486 individuals (98 of which were women).
- 47 single men and women over the age of 50.
- 15 people over the age of 62.

LTLC's History

LTLC's history is important because it shows the shift from a shelter that "warehouses" people, to its current, multi-service mission that works closely with its residents.

During the summer of 1986, a group of citizens concerned for the homeless population in and around Lowell opened the Middlesex Shelter, now known as the Lowell Transitional Living Center. Their original vision, turned to reality, was to provide a 20-bed shelter that also offered clean clothes and a shower for single homeless men and women in the region aged 18-years and older.

The 1980s proved extremely difficult for those in need throughout Lowell and the country. Many service-based organizations including the Department of Mental Health, Department of Social Services, Division of Youth Services, Department of Transitional Assistance, and public hospitals lost Federal and State funding or found their budgets extremely reduced. The Center, in an effort to respond to the growing need of the homeless, expanded from 20 to 90 beds by 1994, and by 1996 became a multi-service agency providing a broad scope of assistance to those in need.

The Center recognized the importance of providing a sober environment for those dealing with substance abuse. So, in December of 1998, LTLC adopted a sober, or "dry," policy to reflect our commitment to provide a positive atmosphere for the people they serve.

After years of planning, and through City, State, and Federal funding, the Center recently purchased and rehabbed a building on Middlesex Street. Their male and female residents now have an inviting sleeping area, and new shower facilities.

The new building has twelve permanent apartments for the chronically homeless. The units are subsidized by Section 8 Assistance Vouchers, through the Lowell Housing Authority, which will be targeted to the elderly and/or disabled.

Pathfinder Safe Haven³

Pathfinder, located on Rock Street in the Acre neighborhood, is part of the Bridgewell organization in Lowell that provides a wide range of programs for individuals with developmental and psychiatric disabilities, the homeless, and children struggling with emotional and behavioral problems.

The mission of Pathfinder remains the same since it opened ten years ago: "To target individuals who have been unable to access services and treatment needed to begin the process of reentering mainstream society." They achieve their mission mainly through operating a drop-in center, and a residential program.

The drop-in center is open to anyone in need regardless of background—which is a rarity in Lowell—making it the only of its kind in the City. According to Executive Director Joseph Tucker, "During the day there's no other place to go but here for those on the street."

The drop-in center, located in a two-story, apartment-style, brick building, provides a safe and secure place for people to relax off of the streets. Both men and women can go there, between 8 A.M. and 8 P.M., to shower, wash laundry, or eat a meal. As you enter, there are offices on your right where individuals can use a phone or find assistance with difficult State entitlement applications in a program they call HOPE. To your left is a large kitchen where three meals a day for between fifty and sixty people are prepared. Straight ahead is a lounge area with a TV, lockers, and a washer/dryer. The on-staff nurse's office is tucked in the back and looks like a regular doctor's office, only smaller. In addition, Pathfinder provides transportation to hospitals, jobs, other services, and GED classes.

The second floor of the building is home to twelve single men who are enrolled in Pathfinder's residential program. According to Pathfinder's website, "Residents are provided with a complete assessment of

³-Information on Pathfinder is taken from www.bridgewell.org and an interview with Pathfinder's Executive Director, Joe Tucker, on February 27, 2006.

needs, offered assistance in selecting medical providers, administering medication, pursuing entitlement benefits and transitional employment opportunities.” Each resident has a private bedroom room, but shares a common bathroom, kitchen, and living space. Half of the apartments are funded through the Department of Mental Health, and the other half are funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The average stay for Pathfinder residents, according to Joe Tucker, is two years.

Everyone working at Pathfinder is pleasant and helpful. They are dedicated to their jobs and helping others. The residents, and visitors, are all kind and interested in talking. On a visit, you will notice everyone discussing current events, job opportunities, and the latest gossip, which creates a relaxed atmosphere.

According to Joe Tucker, Pathfinder plans to expand its operation by building twelve new single room occupancies (SROs) on the empty lot next to their current location. The plans are complete, the funding is in place, and only approval from the City’s Planning Board is needed to begin construction. The new building will help replace Lowell’s dwindling affordable housing supply. According to Joe Tucker, “The city could use an extra 30 to 40 single room occupancies.” However, the Planning Board may not pass Pathfinder’s plans for a new building because they have criticized Pathfinder for their open policy, which sets Pathfinder apart.

The GRIP Project⁴

The GRIP Project, meaning Growing Responsibility and Independence in People Project, is a shelter for young people, ages 16-20, who are homeless, aging out of foster care, or in the care of the state of Massachusetts. The GRIP Project house, located on Varnum Avenue in Pawtucketville overlooking the Merrimack River, has room for up to eighteen individual teen and young adult males and females.

An interesting aspect of GRIP is its dedication to being “by teens, for teens” since it opened in August of 2001. According to Betsy Foran, GRIP’s House

⁴Information for this section was taken from an interview with Betsy Foran, GRIP Project House Manager, on April 5, 2006.

Manager, “This is very important to us. It means staff doesn’t tell the kids what to do. We all come to the table to make decisions. The kids make up the rules in the house: the curfew, what’s expected of you, the requirements to live here.” Sometimes the kids make a decision that fails, but according to Betsy, “We all get together and talk why it didn’t work, what can we do differently.” The goal is to get the kids to learn from their mistakes, because they won’t be a part of the GRIP Project forever. “It’s their life, they’re almost adults. We expect them to make their own decisions, become citizens, spread their wings, and they got to start now.”

This makes the culture of the GRIP house very interesting. All the kids are required to have goals. According to Betsy, “The first thing we ask them is, what are your goals? We talk a lot about long-term and short-term goals.”

Through goal setting, the GRIP Project kids are actively involved in planning their future and developing their workforce skills. “This is more than just housing. I expect you to do stuff while you’re here. They take GED classes, learn life skills like opening a bank account, work in the computer lab, and practice job interviewing. They regularly have visitors who teach the kids things like how to impress employers and build their resumes.”

The GRIP Project is the only shelter of its kind in Lowell, which means they have a waiting list of parentless teens. At any given time there are approximately 12 teens waiting to get into the house. The average stay is nine months. There are other teen programs in Lowell, mainly the United Teen Equality Center (UTECE), but none that provide shelter. Many kids on the waiting list, according to Betsy, are left to “couch surfing,” or if they are 18, can stay at the Lowell Transitional Living Center. Otherwise, they are on the street.

To get the kids into permanent housing, the GRIP Project has some connections with landlords in the area. According to Betsy, “Housing isn’t the problem for these kids. It’s more getting them the employment to pay for the housing.”

Community Teamwork, Inc.⁵

Community Teamwork, Inc. (CTI) is a large non-profit corporation with offices in downtown Lowell. With a \$58 million annual budget, CTI core service area extends to the all of the communities surrounding Lowell, including Chelmsford, Tewksbury, Billerica, Westford, and Dracut. CTI does everything from managing Section 8, to Head Start, WIC, Childcare, farmers markets, fuel assistance, YouthBuild, and family shelters.

CTI works towards homelessness prevention through a variety of programs, organized by their Housing Consumer and Education Center (HCEC). Ed Cameron, CTI's Director of Housing and Homeless Services says, "We see about 2,000 people a year in the HCEC—where people at risk of homelessness can get information and referrals. We try to keep people in the housing they have, by providing things like foreclosure prevention counseling, rental assistance, and energy assistance."

One such program is Rental Assistance for Families in Transition, or RAFT. RAFT's goal is to provide limited financial assistance to allow families to retain their housing, obtain new housing, or avoid homelessness. This includes helping out with security deposits, utilities, furnishings, and transportation related expenses.

A large part of CTI's budget is for the Section 8 program. "We have 2,100 tenant households on Section 8. So most of the money, around \$20 million, goes to landlords for rent." Section 8 is a federally funded rental assistance program that provides low-income families with a voucher that allows its recipient to pay a third of their income on rent, while the remaining rent is paid for through the program.

CTI has a variety of specialty housing options for the disabled. However, there are two family shelters, Milly's Place and the Merrimack House, located on Merrimack Street specifically for homeless families.

⁵The material for this section came from interviews with Ed Cameron, Associate Executive Director, and Elisha Harig-Blaine, SHIFT Coalition Coordinator from CTI, as well as www.com-team.org.

Each home provides space for six families, and typically has between 20 to 25 children living in them at any time. Like Pathfinder, LTLC, and the GRIP Project, each house includes assistance such as GED classes, childcare, job training, and finance assistance for all the tenants. Both Milly's Place and the Merrimack House are temporary shelters and are a last option for families about to become homeless.

The SHIFT Coalition (Stabilized Housing for Individuals and Families in Transition) is part of CTI's HCEC Center, and works to prevent homelessness in Lowell. The Coalition is made up of over thirty community organizations, including the local government, churches, businesses, and non-profits, committed to ending homelessness by pooling their resources.

SHIFT's main goal is to keep people in permanent housing and out of state funded shelters and motels. They do this by providing monetary assistance with rents, moving costs, energy costs, etc.

There are two reasons SHIFT exists. First, SHIFT mainly works with individuals and families that who are "falling through the cracks" in the system. For example, there are many state and federal assistance programs for families, but not much for individuals. Also, some families may not meet the specific Department of Transitional Assistance income or housing requirements to be considered in need of assistance. So SHIFT works with these individuals and families to make sure they remain in stabilized housing.

Second, Elisha Harig-Blaine, SHIFT's director, believes keeping people in their own private housing is far cheaper than housing people in state funded shelters. According to Elisha, "We should close the doors to shelters and prevent people from becoming homeless. Why? Because shelters cost so much, and for a fraction of that money we can keep people in their own housing. Then you can get to the heart of the problem."

Here is Elisha's logic: The cost of shelter for one night is about \$40 per person, and for a month it would be about \$3,600. By preventing someone from needing a shelter, by assisting them with, say \$1,350 for back rent, the state would save \$2,250. According

to Elisha's statistics, SHIFT has helped 20 people (as of March 9, 2006) with \$22,060. However, SHIFT's \$22,060 saved the Massachusetts \$106,640 by preventing these individuals and families from becoming homeless and using shelters.

The SHIFT Coalition is able to provide this type of assistance because they pool the funds of many of their members. CTI contributed \$15,000, Christ Church United in Lowell contributed \$10,000, Christ Church United in Dracut contributed \$1,800, and Eliot Presbyterian contributed \$500, giving the Coalition a total of \$27,300. This pool of funds is more flexible than state or federal funds, and is therefore available for individuals and families ineligible for other assistance.

Other Important Organizations

Besides the four organizations highlighted above, there is a large number of other organizations in Lowell working with the homeless, including:

House of Hope, which provides room for up to 18 homeless families, mostly single mothers, in two shelters. Residents are provided with three meals a day, job training, and other supportive services.⁶

The Lowell Continuum of Care (CoC) is a coalition of organizations who provide services to the homeless. All of the organizations mentioned so far are members. Coordinated by Linda King of Lowell's Department of Planning and Development, the CoC is funded through HUD's McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and works to implement the Housing Management Information System (HMIS) and distribute funding to Lowell's shelters, including \$25,278 for LTLC, \$20,000 for the GRIP Project, and \$15,000 for CTI last year.⁷

The City of Lowell Hunger/Homeless Commission serves as an information clearinghouse of information for organizations in Lowell that serve hungry and homeless. They meet once a month to discuss changes in programs, funding opportunities, and resource opportunities so that all the agencies can better work

together.⁸

What are some similarities of these organizations?

After looking at each of these organizations, we can see similar methods. For instance, each organization does not simply provide shelter without some form of assistance like job training, education, or counseling. As Betsy Foran from the GRIP Project put it, "We don't just allow our residents to sit around. They have to have a plan and goals to find permanent housing." Marianne Staid, Program Manager for House of Hope, Inc. agrees, "We encourage all our residents to look for a job or go to school. We don't allow anyone to sit around." There is a consensus that shelter alone is not good enough to get people off the street. Individualized services are needed to get people into permanent housing.

Also, most organizations work towards preventing homelessness. While some organizations like CTI help with direct assistance for energy and moving costs, other organizations like LTLC see their soup kitchen as a means of preventing homelessness. Kathy Treggiari says, "Our kitchen is open to the whole community. We see it as something that saves people money for things like rent or utilities. It's one less thing for someone to worry about."

While the organizations in Lowell are doing wonderful jobs, they still face many hurdles when it comes to actually ending homelessness. There are funding shortages, expensive housing costs, lack of decent jobs in the region, and a fundamental problem with the federal definition of a homeless person or family. The following section discusses these problems in further detail.

⁸-<http://hhc.lowellwishproject.org/index.html>

⁶-Staid, Marianne. Interview on March 28, 2006.

⁷-<http://www.lowellma.gov/depts/dpd/services/comdev/care>

Section 3

What are the issues Lowell's organizations face?

Each interview I conducted for this project ended with the question, "What are the biggest problems facing the homeless community and organizations serving the homeless in Lowell?"

Each interviewee had their own perspective of problems, but there was a consensus on four issues:

1. Unaffordable housing prices.
2. Lack of decent jobs in the region.
3. Inaccurate definition of homelessness.
4. Lack of federal funding for programs.

High Housing Costs

According to the United States Conference of Mayors, "Lack of affordable housing leads the list of causes of homelessness identified by the city officials."¹ Local leaders agree. Kathy Treggiari, Executive Director of the Lowell Transitional Living Center says, "There isn't enough affordable housing options for many of our clients." And Joe Tucker, Director of Pathfinder says, "The City needs another forty to fifty single room occupancies to meet the housing needs of our community."

A Center for Family, Work, and Community report titled, "Meeting Lowell's Housing Needs," confirms this by saying, "According to National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), Lowell is one of the least affordable cities in the United States ranking 175 out of a possible 186 (a ranking of 1 being the most affordable). Rents are increasing and apartments are increasingly hard to find, house prices are increasing, and overall housing stock is failing to keep up with demand."²

The report continues to say that an estimated number of renters in Lowell unable to afford fair market rent

1-Author Unknown. "Hunger, Homelessness Still a Challenge in America According to Mayors," http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/us%5Fmayor%5Fnewspaper/documents/01_16_06/hunger.asp, January 16, 2006.

2-The Center for Family, Work, and Community. "Meeting Lowell's Housing Needs: A comprehensive Look," Spring 2002. Page 17.

are 34% for a one bedroom, 42% for a two bedroom, and 52% for a three bedroom.³

There are a variety of reasons Lowell has become so unaffordable for many of its residents. One reason is lack of availability. Lowell's Inspectional Services Department reported that from 1989 to present, the city experienced a net loss in apartments—meaning—that roughly 1,124 units and 32 Single Room Occupancies were lost during this time.⁴ These are the same Single Room Occupancies that Joe Tucker claims are needed to help house his clients and reduce the amount of homelessness in Lowell.

Luckily, the affordable housing problem in Lowell is being addressed by organizations in the city. For example, both the Coalition for a Better Acre and the Merrimack Valley Project are working to raise awareness of the affordability problems and helping create new affordable housing options.

The Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA), who is organizing what they call the Our C.A.S.A. campaign, believes the City of Lowell is to blame for the crisis of affordability in Lowell. They believe much of Lowell's effort to draw in wealthy young professionals has helped to decrease the affordable housing options for people already living in Lowell. The CBA's website reads, "[This policy] was a simple but devastating policy for those in need of a decent roof over their head at an affordable price."⁵

The Merrimack Valley Project (MVP) has taken a more regional approach to the affordable housing problem, believing Lowell itself cannot meet the needs if its surrounding communities are not on board. They work with local labor unions, churches, and governments to help support affordable housing laws like the Chapter 40B Affordable Housing Law which requires a cities and towns in Massachusetts to have its affordable housing stock to be at least 10% of the total housing available. MVP is working with Lowell's sur-

3-Ibid.

4-Ibid.

5-www.cbacre.org

rounding communities, including Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Tyngsboro, Tewksbury, and Westford in hopes of formulating a regional consortium that would address affordable housing issues.⁶

Shortage of Decent Jobs

Betsy Foran of the GRIP Project says, “It’s not so much that there isn’t enough housing— We’re able to work with local landlords. It’s that there aren’t enough good paying jobs out there for our kids.” And according to a report by the Center for Social Policy at UMass Boston, shelter residents agree, attributing “their homelessness to financial problems and unemployment.”⁷

Any housing that costs more than 30% of a household’s income is considered unaffordable. In every state more than the minimum wage is required to afford a one or two-bedroom apartment at 30% of income. For example, rent for a 1 bedroom apartment costs between \$900-\$1,000. To afford that on minimum wage, which is \$6.75 an hour in Massachusetts, you would have to work 101 hours a week.

According to SHIFT’s statistics, 32% of their clients are employed with an average gross income of \$12,086 a year. The average rent burden of their clients is 63% of their income.

Problems with Homeless Definition

The federal definition of homeless or a homeless individual is:

An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is--a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutional-

*ized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.*⁸

Individuals working with the homeless in Lowell have problems with this definition. According to Linda King, Continuum of Care Director, the federal definition of homeless, “doesn’t include people who are doubled up with friends or family.” Meaning, people who are homeless, moving from friend’s house to friend’s house, without permanent housing are not considered homeless.⁹

Ed Cameron of CTI expressed similar concerns. “103,000 people in Lowell, with about 16,000 in poverty. Well we got 12 families in our houses, but there’s huge numbers of families doubled up because they weren’t quite poor enough or didn’t fit the DTA’s guidelines, or weren’t defined properly.”¹⁰

So why doesn’t the federal government include homeless people living with friends, or in unstable housing situations? According to Linda King, “It’s because, if included, the number of homeless people wouldn’t be counted as 2 to 3 million. It would probably be twice that, or even more.”¹¹

The underlying message about the true definition of homelessness given to me is this: The real homeless population is not simply the stereotypical mentally challenged, or substance abusing, person living on the street or panhandling for money. It goes beyond them into a less visible population of homeless people, include children “aging out” of foster care, families living with relatives, abused women with nowhere to go, and full-time working people who still cannot afford rent. As we saw in the first section of this report, those actually living on the street, without any shelter, are a relatively small population of a much larger group not recognized by the federal government or the residents of Lowell. Which leads us to the next problem facing Lowell’s organizations.

6-Shaughnessey, Dennis. “Towns address affordable housing Communities hope to form group to tackle 40B issues,” Lowell Sun, May 21, 2006.

7-Center for Social Policy. “Hard Number, Hard Times,” July 2004, Page 4.

8-US Code Collection. “General Definition of Homeless Individual,” http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode42/usc_sec_42_00011302----000-.html

9-Interview with Linda King on April 6, 2006.

10-Interview with Ed Cameron on April 5, 2006.

11-Interview with Linda King on April 6, 2006.

Not Enough Funding from the Federal Government

Many of the people I interviewed told me of their concern about federal budget cuts in social spending because most of the money used to house and support the homeless comes from the federal government. For example, federally funded Section 8 housing vouchers and Community Development Block Grants are vital to Lowell's organizations serving the homeless. As a consequence, when the federal government cuts social spending, Lowell must cut social spending.

The cause for concern is real. As renowned social scientist Frances Fox Piven puts it, "The Bush regime has taken up a long-term business campaign against American social programs."¹² For example, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that, "All domestic programs were cut by \$9 billion, below 2005 levels, in 2006" and, "Community Development Block Grants were reduced a by \$777 million, or 15.7 percent" in 2005.

Section 8 is at risk of funding cuts, and restructuring, as well. If recently proposed cuts are passed, "Approximately 65,000 fewer low-income households would receive rental assistance in 2006."¹³ Bush's restructuring plans for Section 8 would, "remove regulations that were intended to ensure vouchers would reach the poor, and this at a time when census data show growing shortages of affordable housing for extremely low-income renter households, a majority of whom now pay more than half of their income for rent."¹⁴

What are the major strengths of Lowell's homeless services?

Despite these problems, many of which are out of the City's control, Lowell has a lot of strengths in its services for the homeless.

Firstly, the level of dedication to helping those in need by the various directors and workers interviewed for this report is unwavering. Each and everyone I talked to truly wants to see an end to homelessness. Many of the people interviewed have spent their entire careers working with the homeless. For example, Ed Cameron of CTI, worked for the City of Boston for seven years on homeless issues. In addition, he worked for three years with Horizons for Homeless Children, and spent a three months with a shelter in Boston before moving to Lowell to work with CTI.

Lowell also has a very well connected group of organizations. Between the SHIFT Coalition, the Continuum of Care, and the Hunger/Homeless Commission, organizations regularly meet to discuss funding opportunities, program changes, and referral options. Another key source identified by the SHIFT Coalition is MVHub.org. The Merrimack Valley Hub is a website that lists nearly all the organizations in Lowell working on issues from anti-war, to homelessness, to independent media. The members of SHIFT regularly use MVHub.org when referring clients to other services.

Another strength of the organizations in Lowell is their dedication to preventing homeless from ever happening. The SHIFT Coalition, and CTI, is the best example, but other organizations are on board with realizing prevention is the most important goal to have when dealing with homelessness.

Many organizations realize the roots of homelessness, and don't fall into the stereotypical traps other may by blaming the victim. The work the Coalition for a Better Acre and Merrimack Valley Project are doing is evident of that, and their work to provide affordable housing for all, or as the CBA puts it, "Housing is a basic human right," will have a positive impact on reducing homelessness in Lowell and the region.

12-Piven, Frances Fox. *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism*, 2004, p. 65.

13-Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "What do across-the-board cuts mean for domestic appropriations?" January 6, 2006, <http://www.cbpp.org/12-8-05bud2.htm>.

14-Piven, Frances Fox. *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism*, 2004, p. 73.

In Conclusion

After reading this report, I hope you now have a good sense of homelessness issues in Lowell. Here are some facts to keep in mind for the future:

1. About 342 homeless people, by the federal government's definition, live in Lowell.
2. Between 2.5 and 3.5 million Americans are homeless, and their numbers are climbing.
3. Not all homeless people live on the street. About half are living with friends or family.
4. Lowell has a large number of organizations that work with the homeless. All of them provide supportive services for those in need—not just a place to sleep at night.
5. In order to end homelessness in Lowell, we need to deal with high housing costs, lack of decent jobs, lack of federal funding, and an inaccurate homeless definition.
6. Despite all the problems, Lowell has a very dedicated group of people and organizations helping the homeless every day.

Hopefully this report has you eager for more information. Here is a short list of important information sources:

1. General Lowell Census information: www.nmcog.org/lowell.htm
2. Center for Social Policy at UMass-Boston: www.mccormack.umb.edu/csp/index.jsp
3. National Coalition for the Homeless: www.national-homeless.org
4. US Conference of Mayors: www.usmayors.org
5. Center for Family, Work, and Community: www.uml.edu/centers/CFWC/
6. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: www.cbpp.org