

Homeless in Vermont

This is Vermont Public Radio, I'm Neal Charnoff, with a special report on the homeless in Vermont.

Tonight, when darkness falls, more than 1800 Vermonters will be without a home, nearly a third of them children.

A little over 300 people will take refuge in one of Vermont's shelters. There are 22 across the state. Most are only open at night... people have to leave during the day, taking their belongings with them.

Some shelters are large rooms with bunk beds that sleep scores of people. Others are converted homes, where families are usually able to have their own room.

First tonight, we go to Vergennes, where the John Graham Shelter houses an average of 17 people. And that almost always includes families.

VPR's Lynne McCrea visited the shelter, to meet the newest arrival there.

(Baby sounds- "dah...dah!")

(McCrea) 11-month-old Cameron Vieu has just woken up from an afternoon nap. He sleeps in a portable crib that he's almost outgrown. And he shares the space with his parents, Dan and Amanda Vieu. This private room at the Vergennes shelter is now 'home' for the family of three. Along with Cameron's crib, there's a single bed, a

fold up cot, and some chairs. Dan grabs a little red shirt and blue shorts from a pile of clothes and starts to dress his son...

(Dan) "Okay, ready? This shirt's not going on easy is it?"

(McCrea) A year ago, life was good for 29-year-old Dan Vieu, of Bridgewater. He worked in construction, as a framer, making good wages. Then one day, when he was working up on a roof, Dan had an accident.

(Dan) "One of my peers shot himself with a nail gun, and when he did, he knocked me off the truss..."

(McCrea) Dan suffered a back injury that made it impossible to keep working in construction. He took a maintenance job at a hotel, which came with free housing. But Dan says his back pain persisted, and he had to leave the job.

(Dan) "I went and stayed with relatives. But the landlord didn't allow children and it was too small in general. We stayed at a hotel for probably 3 or 4 days. That's very, very expensive. So, we had to come to a shelter."

(Ready) "I've got my bubbles upstairs, dude."

(McCrea) Elizabeth Ready is the Director of the John Graham Shelter. The old house in downtown Vergennes has an average of 17 people staying at any time. Ready says there are 20 people living here right now, including several families.

(Ready) “We’re constantly full. And oftentimes we’re not able to take people, because we just don’t have the room. What we’re seeing is a big increase in families with children, and people with jobs coming to the shelter for refuge. It’s not just the idea of single men anymore.”

(McCrea) A former state senator and auditor, Elizabeth Ready became director of the shelter last year. She says more families are coming here for a number of reasons.

(Ready) “It’s a combination of issues. People in low wage jobs can’t afford housing in the area. So that’s just a fact. We have, sometimes, people working two jobs and together they might make 14 dollars an hour. Well, it’s very hard to find a place with that kind of income. Then there are a number of folks that might be either suffering from a mental illness or a physical disability, or a developmental disability or in recovery, and quite frankly, there just aren’t places for them to be, and so they’re coming to the shelter.”

(McCrea) Whatever brings people here, Elizabeth Ready says she tries to provide them with more than food and shelter. She tries to tap other resources people might need that will enable them to get into permanent housing—whether it’s a G.E.D., some job training, or mental health counseling.

(Ready) “The whole issue is whether or not people use this period in their life as a chance to move forward, to make some changes. And it’s a

time when there's tremendous potential to change direction. It can be a turning point, when you're homeless. So what we want to do is offer all the resources we can. We don't want someone to come here and not have a chance to see a mental health counselor, or, for example to see the doctor. So that's the issue—whether or not we have access to the resources to be able to help people make that change in their life.”

(Sounds of Dan with baby... “almost done, bubba...”)

(McCrea) For Dan Vieu, his back injury has made it difficult to do simple physical tasks such as leaning over to dress his son.

(Vieu) “...shirt is not going on easily, huh bubba?” (Cameron starts to cry)...

(McCrea) Dan is applying for temporary disability assistance from the state, and he hopes to have surgery on his back in the next few months. Meanwhile, he and his wife, Amanda, are trying to find child care, so that she can work part time. Dan says moving into the shelter was difficult at first for his wife, but that she's adjusting now.

(Dan) “The first few days or two we were here she was down, depressed. Now she's happy. She realizes there's a light at the end of our tunnel, and we're just going to go on from here. And we will find housing shortly, and life will get better...”

(Sounds of a baby rattle)

(McCrea) For 11-month-old Cameron, the transition to a shelter has been smooth. But that's not always the case. Sitting in a tiny office lined with shelves of food, Elizabeth Ready says that for school age kids, living in a shelter can be "very tough".

(Ready) "There's a lot of research out there that shows homeless children are sick more often, don't do as well in school. There are lots of issues. It's very tough on kids. You know, we had a family here with 3 children and they were going through a tremendous amount of suffering at that period in their life. And the little girl used to come in here. And she'd come in and sit down and all she'd say is "I'm going on a field trip on Saturday, "I'm going on a field trip on Saturday"—over and over—just trying to look forward. You see amazing bravery on the part of these children. But it's very difficult, there's no doubt about it."

(Sounds in kitchen)

(McCrea) Dinner time at the shelter brings people into the communal kitchen, where a large wood table nearly fills the room. Today, the meal is fresh salad, with pasta and a homemade cheese sauce, prepared by a couple of students from Middlebury College.

Director Elizabeth Ready says she relies on contributions like these, to keep the shelter going. It costs \$10 to 20 dollars a day to house someone here.

(Ready) “Every night of the week I’m out asking for money or writing grants. And it comes in small amounts.”

(McCrea) Ready is frustrated by what she says is very little public support for shelters. She says state and federal funding has stayed level for almost 10 years, until this May, when the legislature voted to boost funding by \$150,000. That brings the general fund total to nearly \$700,000 dollars for the state’s 22 shelters, and 13 other agencies that provide services to the homeless.

(Ready) “So, I think we’re beginning to see some awareness that, though none of us would want to be in a shelter, and people don’t want to fund shelters... that they are pretty important. “

(McCrea) Dan Vieu says he is trying to make the most of his days in the Vergennes shelter, working to get his health back and find affordable housing. Meanwhile, he describes his time here as “a life learning experience”.

(Dan) “The public perception of homeless people would be of a guy pushing a cart down a road, collecting cans. And personally, that was my perspective too. And it’s not. It can happen to anybody. It doesn’t matter who you are. My life was going pretty good, and I took a spill off a roof and here I sit, a year later. It can happen to anybody at any time. Life can change in a moment. I’m living proof of that, as is probably everybody here.”

(Charnoff) VPR's Lynne McCrea, reporting from the John Graham shelter in Vergennes:

Counting the Homeless

Of the estimated 1800 people who are homeless tonight, the majority will be sleeping in cars or tents, or 'couch surfing'—moving between friends or relatives for short periods of time.

Still others go unaccounted for, and so the actual number of homeless is assumed to be even higher. The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness says that number has been hovering at around 4,000 people a year.

Beyond the numbers, there's a new concern among the people who run the state's homeless shelters: the increase families and young people they're seeing.

John Fairbanks of the Vermont Housing Finance Agency has been visiting shelters around the state to interview people about the experience of being homeless. It's part of a report he's working on, that he hopes will give a 'face' to homelessness.

(Fairbanks) "The idea is to give people that read the upcoming report a chance to really meet people and hear what they have to say, not just read numbers about homeless people in Vermont and how many are children and how many are working... that's good data and that's important to have. But we think it's every bit as important

for people to hear the voices of the people behind the numbers.”

(Charnoff) But Fairbanks says finding people to interview has been a challenge.

(Fairbanks) “It’s been a slow process because first of all you’re talking with people who are part of an enormously vulnerable population. You’re talking with people who in almost every single case have encountered some kind of trauma in their lives. You’re talking with people for whom life is enormously difficult. It’s tiring being homeless and trying to figure out where you’re going to sleep every night, and trying to figure out how you’re going to get to a job interview and who’s going to take care of your children. So first of all, you have to find time when people you’d like to talk to have both the time and energy to talk with you. It’s a long process. It requires patience.”

(Charnoff) On this day, Fairbanks is in Burlington visiting ‘Spectrum’. It’s a shelter and drop-in center for young people. And at lunchtime it’s a place to get some food and watch a movie.

(Megan) “I usually just come here to get away... a couple times a week... just to hang out.”

(Charnoff) 18-year-old Megan can relate to the kids who are living at Spectrum. She was homeless two years ago, when, Megan says, her parents kicked her out of the house because of her

drug habit. During that time she lived on and off at Spectrum.

(Megan) “The difficulty with Spectrum is they only have so many beds. So a lot of times when you need a place you’d have to wait up to a couple of months, especially being under 18. This is like you’re only option when they have like five beds for girls and five beds for boys.”

(Charnoff) Today, Megan says she is living in an apartment and has a job.

She’s agreed to tell her story to John Fairbanks, for the VHFA report...

(Megan) “There’s weeks that I’d have to pitch a tent, like at the waterfront and just sleep outside. Sometimes I would just stay up all night because I didn’t have a place.”

(Fairbanks) “Have any unpleasant encounters?”

(Megan) “Oh, plenty. A lot of really, really weird, crazy people are out at those hours – a bunch of drunk people.”

(Fairbanks) “Were there any friends to keep you company when you were out on your own like that?”

(Megan) “Not really. You’d be surprised. A lot of times when you’re in the predicament of being homeless, your friends... you kind of see who your true friends are.”

(Fairbanks) “There’s not like a sort of street support system necessarily...”

(Megan) “No...”

(Fairbanks) “...that’s going to help somebody like you.”

(Megan) “Not at all.”

(Charnoff) After several months of collecting interviews, Fairbanks is ready to compile his report, including Megan’s story, which he says is a familiar one for a certain portion of the homeless population.

(Fairbanks) “I talked to a number of young people in their late teens and early 20’s who had very similar stories. A lot of them come out of homes that were abusive. Several of them, like Megan, got involved with drugs and got thrown out of their houses. Other people had different problems trying to cope with everyday life and ended up on the streets. And that is a portion of the homeless population. We also found that a growing portion of the homeless population is families with children, many of them who are working, who are simply not making enough money to keep a roof over their heads.”

(Charnoff) “What did you hear from people running the shelters? What are their needs?”

(Fairbanks) “Every shelter provider that I spoke with- and I spoke with most of the providers around the state, every single one of them was constantly scrambling to obtain enough resources to deal with a growing demand for their services, and each and every one of them was basically living on a very thin financial edge, and constantly trying to find ways to bring more money to bear on the problem.”

(Charnoff) John Fairbanks is with the Vermont Housing Finance Agency. He says his report is the

first of its kind, and that he's making it available to legislators, housing advocates, and the public.

Rutland Vets

With the nation currently at war on two fronts, the problem of veterans who are homeless is expected to increase as well. VPR's Nina Keck found that there are Vermont veterans who are slipping through the cracks.

(Keck) It's lunch time and about thirty people eat in the cafeteria at Rutland's Open Door Mission, a combination soup kitchen, thrift store and homeless shelter.

(Cafeteria worker) "How's the sandwiches?"

(Man) "Good."

(Keck) Of the 42 people currently living at the Mission, thirty are veterans. Tom, a 45-year-old, served four years in the Navy during the U.S. invasion of Grenada.

(Tom) "I have a disorder called PTSD. And I ended up losing my job because they said I was a liability. Because I was having panic attacks on the job. I was a builder and I was having them up on the ladder and stuff like that."

(Keck) Tom wasn't married and didn't have family to fall back on. So he says it didn't take long for him to fall behind on rent and become homeless. His post traumatic stress disorder became worse.

(Tom) “Depression set in and I tried to kill myself – suicide. And that’s when I wined up at the VA, knowing that there was help there for me. I never knew it before.”

(Keck) “You never knew there was help available to you when you came home from the service?”

(Tom) “Nope, nope - they don’t advertise it. The only thing they advertise is for you to join the service. They don’t bother telling you - hey if you’ve got problems while you’re in the service that hey, there’s help for you.”

(David Frantz) “I think the system is trying to address this issue - with regard to PTSD and returning veterans.”

(Keck) That’s David Frantz, director of the Vet Center in White River Junction.

(Sound of a pool table)

(Keck) While Vet Centers are affiliated with the VA, they look different - more homey, and they’re staffed almost entirely by veterans. Two men are playing pool in the center’s lobby. There’s a big screen TV and some couches nearby. The idea says Frantz, is to make it as comfortable as possible for vets to come and get counseling and other help. Travis Jones, an outreach counselor at the Vet Center, who served in the Iraqi war, says all that helps. But he says there are still too many soldiers out there not getting what they need.

(Jones) “Now with the war on terrorism it’s more National Guard and Reserves that are out there. And when they come back home they’ve got to go back to their jobs. They can’t just do time out and get some counseling. They’ve got to get back to work and make some money for the family and get back into the routine. So you’ve got to go out and be more innovative and go out and tell them, because they’re not going to take the time to come search for you. You’ve got to search for them.”

(Keck) That means Jones and another vet center clinician are each on the road two days a week traveling all over the state to provide counseling and other services. But he says it’s frustrating because there isn’t one central database of veterans.

(Jones) “If they wore a sign that says ‘I’m a veteran’ it’d be easy to find them. But they don’t. I’ve talked to some army reservists who came back who say ‘I’ve never heard of the vet center.’ ‘I went back and did my demo at Fort Bragg and they just gave us some packets on the VA and that was it and we went home - got sent back to Vermont.’”

(Keck) Some veterans, even when they are offered help from the VA don’t want it. Jones says there’s a common misconception that the Veterans Administration is just another branch of the service. And he says many returning soldiers don’t want anything to do with another military organization. Cheryl Beversdorf is President of the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans.

Fighting homelessness is complex, she says, because of a number of significant challenges.

(Beverdorf) “A big one being employment. Many of the young people who are getting out of the military may have gone into the military when they were 18 years old. Consequently they didn’t go beyond high school, get any specialized skills. They never went on a job interview. They’ve never had to write a resume.”

(Keck) Beverdorf says in response, the Department of Labor has developed extensive training programs to help those leaving the service find employment faster. But even with a job, she says for many younger veterans, current housing costs are simply unaffordable.

Larry Daigle sits in a small office in White River Junction. It’s the headquarters of a volunteer, nonprofit organization called *Friends of Veterans*. They provide small amounts of cash assistance to veterans in Vermont and New Hampshire to help prevent homelessness. Business he says ironically is booming.

(Daigle) “...very much so. In the last six to eight months I’d say that a good share of our clients are Iraqi vets, Afghanistan vets. They’re coming back just flooded with bills. A lot of times the spouse can’t work because she’s got to take care of the children, she can’t afford the day care whatever. So yeah, we’ve been getting flooded with the younger vets.”

(Keck) Daigle says up 'til now they've been able to help most of them. But he says that could change. A few months ago, they learned that funding they'd been receiving from New Hampshire had been cut drastically from \$30,000 a year to just under \$9,000. Daigle says a state official told them federal budget cuts were to blame. It's ironic he says, considering they get a lot of referrals from the VA- a federal agency.

Despite having less to work with, he says they'll do the best they can for as many as possible.

For VPR News, I'm Nina Keck

(Charnoff) Besides concerns over veterans who are already homeless, social workers say there's also an alarming number of returned soldiers they refer to as 'the hidden homeless' - those living with friends or relatives, in a motel or their car.

Why does homelessness persist in Vermont? And what efforts are underway to address the problem? Melinda Bussino is Director of the Brattleboro Area Drop-in Center, a day shelter for the homeless. She says underlying the issue is economics.

(Bussino) "One of the things that has always affected homelessness is the lack of – or hopefully in the future, not the lack of – some subsidized housing from the federal government in the form of Section 8 housing certificates or public housing being able to build more family housing, in particular. So, it is economics. It's having funds put to other things, whether overseas in a war, or

other priorities locally and statewide. We just haven't seen the funding to get people off the street and provide the kinds of affordable housing people are needing."

(Charnoff) Governor Jim Douglas recently elevated the Interagency Council on Homelessness to include Commissioners from a number of state agencies.

Cathy Voyer chairs the Council. She says the goal is to try to use the same available services more effectively. An example, she says, is providing a combination of services that can help to prevent homelessness.

(Voyer) The Governor has initiatives on the "deter" which is substance abuse and community providers, with service providers and housing providers working together. The "GA" pilot project, general assistance pilot projects, where again, we're utilizing existing services differently, where, in the past, the emergency assistance for those who are going to lose their home has just been handed out, without really saying, 'okay, here's the crisis funding. But what else is creating this? And why is it that every year you continue to come back?' Not because they're at fault, but what are we doing and not doing right?"

(Charnoff) Melinda Bussino, from Brattleboro, serves on the Interagency Council on Homelessness. She's hopeful the group can make progress.

(Bussino) I know the state is under huge financial pressures - a lot of them around the shrinking Medicaid funds that are coming from the federal government, which means that the state has to find more dollars to just provide basic services to a lot of Vermonters. But, certainly the people around that table are committed to doing something to make homelessness at least less, if not to end it."

(Charnoff) Meanwhile, John Fairbanks of the Vermont Housing Finance Agency hopes people will read his new report, so they can really understand what it's like to be homeless.

(Fairbanks) "I hope people read this report and have their eyes opened. I hope people read this report and get a better sense of the reality of being homeless in Vermont. And I hope that it stirs some people to work a little harder to find ways to help people who are homeless. We'd like to see people who are working in housing policy, people advocating for affordable housing get a copy of this report. But it will also be available to the general public and it would be great if a lot of people could take a few minutes and read this, and really understand what it means to be homeless in the Green Mountain State."

(Charnoff) Tonight's stories about homelessness are just a few examples of what some Vermonters are experiencing right now. They are struggling with health problems, drug addictions, joblessness and a lot of uncertainty.

The people who work with the homeless will continue to look for the resources needed - shelter, food, health care and employment.

And they'll keep working toward their goal: that tomorrow night, one less child is sleeping in a car... one less veteran is living in a shelter... one less family is without a home.

The Producer of "Homeless in Vermont" is Lynne McCrea. The audio engineer is Chris Albertine. John Van Hoesen is the Executive Producer.

For Vermont Public Radio, I'm Neal Charnoff.