

Homelessness; Preventing evictions called key

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With homelessness still at a high level in the Columbus area, a local mediation agency is calling for a greater focus on the staggering number of residents who face eviction.

For the past decade, Franklin County has had more evictions filed -- about 19,000 a year - - than anywhere else in the state, said Shelley Whalen, executive director of Community Mediation Services of Central Ohio.

Cuyahoga County has more residents but posts only about 12,000 eviction filings a year, Whalen said.

"Eviction, we think, is one of the best-kept secrets in this town," Whalen said. "The relevance to growing homelessness has been sorely overlooked."

The agency launched its Housing Stability/Homelessness Prevention Program in collaboration with Franklin County Municipal Court five years ago.

Supporters say it has helped thousands of low-income residents resolve landlord-tenant disputes, get evictions dismissed, negotiate pay-to-stay arrangements or -- if moving is unavoidable -- voluntarily leave without a credit-damaging court action.

But a grant that had provided more than \$250,000 a year to help run the program is expiring, and Whalen is worried. "It's crazy to me that I'm as frightened as I am about our ability to continue to provide services," she said.

Helping a family stabilize its housing situation costs the mediation agency about \$300; seeing a family through a shelter stay takes about \$3,100, Whalen said. The average time for that stay is about 24 days.

A recent report found that 61 percent of people in local homeless shelters who completed one of the agency's eviction-prevention and education workshops said they had been evicted previously.

"We're well aware that the vast majority of people who are evicted don't wind up in homeless shelters," Whalen said. "But think of it in reverse: Most people who become homeless have been evicted."

Mediation Services has asked the county for funding, she said. The agency served 759 households through its housing-stabilization and homelessness-prevention program in the past year and wants to expand the effort.

Meanwhile, the Community Shelter Board says its emergency-shelter system continues to run far above capacity.

The number of homeless families served during the most recent fiscal year (1,426 households) declined by about 9 percent from 2014, but that total is still 63 percent higher than four years ago, according to shelter-board reports.

"We're not seeing any kind of walking back in terms of families becoming homeless," said Michelle Heritage, the shelter board's executive director. "It really, really worries me."

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federally mandated one-day count of the homeless in January showed overall homelessness up by about 24 percent in Franklin County since 2010. Nationally, overall homelessness declined by 11 percent during that time.

Heritage and other advocates prefer looking at local, full-year data rather than the government's "Point in Time" counts. This year's one-day count, for example, showed a decline in family homelessness that doesn't seem to mesh with the current situation.

"It only measures one night out of 365," she said.

Heritage said that, when it comes to prevention, eviction education is a valuable service that should be funded.

"We can respond to homelessness -- that's our role," she said of the emergency system. "But in terms of why, and getting way upstream, we've got to work together as a community."

Whalen said an analysis of the housing-stability/homelessness-prevention program showed that mediators were able to help about 90 percent of clients maintain their housing or obtain alternative housing. Much of the time, she said, people facing eviction have jobs and can pay their current rent but often don't have money for back rents they owe.

Richard Mitchell, 41, an East Side resident who attended one of the workshops on Wednesday, said he understood little about the eviction process until he faced an action last year.

He said he fell behind after the deaths of his son and his mother.

"I had the means. I took the money to court, but the landlord wouldn't accept it," said Mitchell, who found out about the workshop through Volunteers of America Greater Ohio and its Veterans and Families First program.

Mitchell wound up in homeless shelters. He's living with a girlfriend now and hopes to get his own apartment again soon. He also wants to make sure he understands tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities.

"The way I got evicted, I don't agree with," he said. "I wanted more answers."

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