

Helping the Have-Nots

Homelessness is a growing crisis affecting more than just the down-and-out



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There is no such thing as “the face of homelessness,” as it turns out. The oft-used expression is well-intentioned but wildly inaccurate.

Instead, there are many faces of homelessness worn by people from many walks of life. They’re young to old, of every race and creed, the residents of every Florida county, people with or without formal higher education or successful previous careers, and oft en the victims not of addictions or mental illness as traditional stereotypes sometimes suggest, but of ill luck and unfortunate circumstances.

Recent studies of living conditions for Americans show a majority of households, about two out of three, managing only to meet their bills each month, able to maintain little extra in checking accounts and none in savings. Under those conditions, a medical emergency, a car accident with costs they can’t meet and subsequent loss of transportation, a jump in rent or homeowner association fees, the death of a spouse faced by people too old to work along with the subsequent end of a monthly Social Security check, all may result in losses that lead to homelessness. It’s just not that hard to do.

A glance at the problem from the cradle of a winter holiday season that celebrates largesse can prove startling and disturbing, but there’s good news: People can help. And their help can change the universe for neighbors in trouble.

“These people are our neighbors, and this is a problem that can be solved,” said Steve Brooder, CEO of St. Matthew’s House, a nonprofit organization operating shelters in Naples, Immokalee and Fort Myers, where a new 39-bed shelter for women from both Collier and Lee counties has just opened its doors. “No one wants to be hopeless and homeless. The faces of these people, our neighbors, can be a mom with two kids or an elderly person who lost a spouse and their HOA or insurance went up. And now they’re homeless.”



St. Matthew’s House, a nonprofit organization, served more than 1,000 meals on Thanksgiving. COURTESY PHOTO

More than ever before, he added, the population of homeless people includes many first-timers.

That’s what all the officials who work to improve the lives of homeless people said, even though the numbers have multiplied.

Many people may want to help the homeless without seeing how, and the first step may just be to see them, suggested Ashley Brantley, executive director of the nonprofit Jesus Loves You in Charlotte County.

“Our previous director drove past a man one day, saw him and turned her vehicle around to go talk to him,” she recalled. “She started a conversation, and his first statement was, ‘You saw me?’

In honor of November being National Homelessness Awareness Month, this week’s issue of Florida Weekly shines a spotlight on the numerous challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness, as well as the efforts of individuals and organizations working tirelessly to provide support and solutions.

“Just engaging in a conversation, if it’s safe — asking if they’re familiar with the resources available.”

Brantley added this, too: “If it really pulls on your heartstrings, reach out to organizations or ministries like ours and see how you can help.”

The housing dilemma

From east to west, officials also said the single biggest problem creating the often heartbreaking dilemma of a human without a home is not addiction, illness or ill will, and it's certainly not laziness.

The problem is a lack of affordable housing, enough food or transportation to a job that can pay enough to live in the affordable housing.

“When you look at what’s happened to the Florida housing market and the cost of rent, and compare that to the wage base, it’s very unaffordable to live here if you’re not making a certain dollar amount,” said Karen Davidson, president and CEO of Gulfstream Goodwill Industries in Palm Beach County.



A volunteer at St. Matthew's House serves plates of Thanksgiving food to the hundreds of people who turned out for a hot meal. COURTESY PHOTO

“It always comes down to money, to finding the land — NIMBYism is prevalent, the ‘not in my backyard’ attitude (of people and politicians). And it can come down to (placing) specific populations. So, you might not want to have seniors in a housing complex that has chronic homelessness or women with children, and that takes some planning.”

The condition is far from hopeless, even if individuals who have fallen into it can't sometimes see that.

“This is absolutely a problem that can be solved, but it won't be one person or one government that solves it,” Davidson said. “The United States should not have individuals who are unhoused and unsheltered if that's not something they want to do — and the majority do not want to be in those circumstances.”

Gulfstream Goodwill operates all four Palm Beach County shelters and others in Indian River, Okeechobee, St. Lucie and Martin counties. And not just shelters; it includes programs staffed by case managers who can help get people on their feet and employed with safe and comfortably habitable living arrangements that are permanent, rather than temporary.

“When people think about the homeless, they often think about health or substance abuse problems,” Davidson said. “But the face of homelessness is



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changing.

“People who live paycheck to paycheck may have had an incident or an accident. It could be somebody sleeping on a friend’s couch, and these people are considered sheltered but still homeless.”

In the United States as a whole, about two-thirds of households live paycheck to paycheck, a condition common in Florida where service-industry jobs are both prevalent and relatively low-paying, where groceries are up 25% on the average, and insurances, car repairs, rent and utilities seem to have skyrocketed far above increases in wages.

As a result, people can get into trouble at the drop of a hat.



BRANTLEY

“It could happen to any of us. There but for the grace of God go I,” said Brooder, pointing to the new 39-bed shelter for women in the Dunbar section of Fort Myers.

The shelter offers 11 private dorms for women with children and 28 beds for single women. It also includes shower and laundry facilities, a central kitchen, a playroom and staff offices, all designed to

help about 300 women rotating through to more stable lives, he hopes — single women, seniors and women with children — each year.

“The homeless population has grown as the lack of affordable housing has reached a crisis stage,” Brooder said, echoing the words of colleagues. “And one of the changes we’ve seen in the homeless demographics since COVID and the hurricanes is a lot more first-time homelessness.

In a matter of hours, Hurricane Ian alone left many people on the southwest coast without homes. Some had had the friendship, family or financial wherewithal to quickly locate alternative living circumstances. Some didn’t.



“We used to think about

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chronic homelessness from drug addiction or mental illness, but now it’s people who were kicked into homelessness because of the economy, the loss of a spouse, a storm, a health challenge that cost them a job — so many things,” Brooder added.

If two people who can no longer work most or any jobs rely on Social Security, and one dies, the survivor may become homeless, he pointed out.

“Now the population is markedly made of women and senior citizens... and that’s a tough one.”

Each week, St. Matthews does an occupancy report on all of its facilities in Collier and Lee. In a recent report, Brooder said, 32% of shelter residents were over the age of 55.

“That’s a unique challenge. We used to operate as a working shelter. People would come in needing a place to help them get back to work or on their feet,”

Brooder said. “But with seniors, they often can’t get back to work.”

And fighting homelessness is not just a matter of providing shelter.

It’s a much more complex challenge.

Jeanette Smith is a model of how that can work, although it’s not a model she ever wished to be or imagined she would be, she said.

In mid-November, Smith graduated from the culinary school established by Gulfstream Goodwill at the Lewis Homeless Resource Center in West Palm Beach, a place she’d reached through help from another West Palm organization with high marks for helping troubled people, The Lord’s Place.

The Lewis Center and a good case manager will now help her find both housing — she’s likely to share rent with another woman or two in an affordable neighborhood, she said — and decent work.

That her journey has been a long, hard road is no cliché.

Smith, 56, was born and raised in Sweden, married an American, had three children and spent 18 years living in Connecticut and Palm Beach County, where the family moved in 2004, in comfortable circumstances. She worked in retail sales in a successful career.

In the **KNOW**

Sobering statistics

- **In Florida:** The total number of people experiencing homelessness in January 2023 was 30,809. In 2024, the count climbed to 31,462.

Homeless agencies partner to do a Point in Time or PIT count of homeless by county on a given night in January each year. The information goes to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which sponsors programs across the state and country. Numbers are widely acknowledged to be guesses, likely on the short side.

- **In Palm Beach County:** Prior to COVID, officials say, they counted 1,397 homeless individuals on a January night. In January this year, the number was 2,126.

- **In Lee County:** In 2023, 292 females were homeless. In 2024, it was 387 — a 33% increase in the number of women counted as homeless. And the Lee count went up 14% year over year, from 692 in 2023 to 788 this year.

- **In Collier County:** The 2024 numbers show a 25% increase over 2023. Total homeless counted in 2023: 703. In 2024, the number was 878. That’s a 25% increase.

- **In Charlotte County:** The Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council identified 701 homeless people in January this year. In 2023, the number was 427.

- **Florida Department of Health 2024 Homeless numbers:**
Palm Beach: 2,126
Lee: 941
Collier: 660
Charlotte County: 343

“When people think about the homeless, they often think about health or substance abuse problems. But the face of homelessness is changing.”

— **Karen Davidson**, president and CEO of Gulfstream Goodwill Industries in Palm Beach County.

A divorce left her working on her own, a single mom and a bad car accident in 2017 resulted in a serious spinal injury that prevented her from carrying on her successful career.

She began to struggle, and things got worse in 2020, she recalled.

“I was renting a house, and my landlord wanted to make it a Section 8 property, but I didn’t qualify — and she didn’t tell me. So she didn’t renew my lease,” Smith said. “I had no saved money for a first month, last month security deposit, so that’s how I ended up homeless.”

Having lost her rental, “I started sleeping in a friend’s car, or on the beach or in parks. I was outside the whole time. Sometimes I stay in a place with a shower for a night or two, but I spent years doing this.”

Her former husband, meanwhile, went to court and took away her children, a fact she can’t describe without tears, for which she tries to apologize.

In her time on the street, she was robbed and beaten up several times, once so badly she had to be hospitalized, she said. e

Th Lewis Center, however, made all the difference once she reached it.

“I spent three months there, and in those 90 days, I was able to find housing, where I’m staying now, and I got into the culinary program, which has a stipend, so we got paid,” she said. “I went from 18 years of having a nice home to on the street, but I finally got in touch with the Lord’s Place, had a great case manager, and I’m here now.”

The difference between street living and shelter with a hand up is too great for her to describe, but when she pointed to details most people take for granted, her voice trembled with both wonder and gratitude.

“They give you a TV, a full-size bed, bedding, towels — the whole shebang for the bathroom, if I can use that word, ‘shebang’ — with shower curtain, rugs,

towels. They give you pots and pans, plates, utensils, cleaning things... it's fabulous."

Both volunteers and officials are trying new strategies to help those who make up the new faces of the homeless, like Smith's, Brooder said, echoing the words of others.

"In Collier and Lee, there are several initiatives — one is through HOT teams, the Homeless Outreach Teams," Brooder explained.

The Lee County Sheriff's Office has two HOT deputies who devote themselves full-time to finding homeless people and getting them to help.

And in Collier, said Brooder, "we've started initiatives with sheriff's ridealongs. A case manager rides with the deputy and goes out to engage them during the day and into the early evening.

"They're saying, 'Hey, we can get you some help. Come to the shelter. We'll get you new clothes, hygiene, water, other resources.' The deputies know where they are. And where the tent encampments are. They're not there to harass anybody. They're not going to arrest somebody if they see an open container."

Another idea the professional helpers are adopting is the opening of day centers.

"The idea is you have a place where the homeless can come during the day, say from 9 to 3 or 4 p.m.," Brooder said. "They can get out of the heat or rain or weather. Potentially, there are showers. There's food, coffee and maybe computers where they can seek new employment. You invite in veterans' groups or the United Way." |

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