



COURTESY PHOTO

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

# HOMELESS

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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."



BROODER

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?'"

"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.

"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," David-



BRANTLEY

son 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 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.

"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 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