

The First 50 Years Serving Columbia County

Part 6: Houselessness Comes to Columbia County

By Leanne Murray, Community Action Team, Human Investment Department

When Community Action Team (CAT) opened its doors in 1966, they primarily served older adults and children. As large-scale homelessness appeared in America in the mid-80s, CAT added services for homeless families and individuals through a variety of state and federal programs. As those programs and funding streams have changed, the team at CAT has also watched the nature of homelessness change.

In fact, it has changed so much that there is a growing trend to use the term houseless instead of homeless. When most Americans hear the word homeless, they conjure an image of someone shaggy and dirty, lazy and dishonest, maybe addicted. No one would deny that there are individuals for whom that description is fairly representative. But more and more, that stereotype is less accurate for the majority of people who technically qualify as homeless according to measures set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD does not consider a tent or a public place to be adequate housing, and most people would agree. However, there are others who, at least temporarily, would consider their tent their home. This is one reason why the term houseless has been introduced.

Another, possibly more significant reason for the new term lies behind an effort to dispel the prevalent stereotype of the homeless population. For the vast majority of those who experience houselessness, they do everything they can to avoid it or to get out of it. Sometimes it becomes unavoidable when life takes a detour: a job lost, an expensive health crisis, a dissolved relationship.

To use a metaphor borrowed from medicine, people experiencing homelessness/houselessness can be found on a broad spectrum. There is a saying among families who have a child with autism, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." The next one you meet is likely to exhibit very different traits. People representing one end of the spectrum might not be able to speak aloud or adequately control their muscles; they may need some degree of supervision and care for their entire life. At the other end of the spectrum you'll find individuals who are able to maintain good jobs and relationships with relatively few barriers. You may not even know they have autism. So is the spectrum that represents homelessness. Yes, there are people who do not have the skills or resources to effectively function in society on their own. And there is another end to the spectrum.

Elizabeth Muthersbaugh* is the perfect example. She is originally from Columbia County and has been back since 1988. Since then she has worked at the same local employer, moving up in the ranks for almost 30 years. She raised her family here, she plans to retire here. There is just one significant problem. When she stops working, she will only have her Social Security benefit to support herself, a net total of \$1008 per month. She will not be able to afford to stay in the rental home she has lived in since 1989.

Last year, at age 68, Muthersbaugh was hospitalized three different times with pneumonia and could only work part-time when she was able to return. She had already worked through two bouts of breast cancer treatments in 2004 and 2011. She is a hard worker, a loving mother and grandmother, a responsible neighbor, and thrifty by nature. Her Toyota is a 2001 model and her adult granddaughter

lives with her to share expenses. She is full of gratitude for her life and her health. You would enjoy meeting her.

And yet, Muthersbaugh is genuinely afraid that she will become homeless after she retires at the end of the year. Her fear is not unfounded. And circumstances just like hers are becoming commonplace; it's a big concern.

She came to CAT last month to get some guidance because she did not know what to do to prepare for her anticipated life change. The good news is that the housing case manager had some ideas and resources to provide. The bad news is that the most significant resources, a subsidized Section 8 voucher and low-income housing units, have very long waiting lists. In some cases the wait may be two or three years. At least now Muthersbaugh knows she needs to get her name on all the waiting lists. She also learned about the records she needs to gather in order to get the maximum deposit refund from her current landlord.

There were a few more concrete resources CAT could present. When Muthersbaugh does need to move, she will probably qualify to receive financial assistance with the deposit expense for her new home. At her level of income she will also qualify to receive occasional financial assistance with her utility bills. Most importantly, CAT will meet with her again to help her create a plan. CAT's goal for all clients is to help them create and follow a plan that provides stability within their means. They assist with creating budgets and identifying other avenues to either increase income or decrease expenses.

The inflated housing market in northwest Oregon is making it even harder to find a home. Housing of all types is in such high demand that affordable and market-rate rental units are nearly impossible to find. In a small housing market like Columbia County, it's even tougher. If a rental unit does become available, it is far more expensive than it was as little as six months ago. Now, previously stable households with two incomes are finding themselves unable to make ends meet. As a result, the number of extended families living together has drastically increased in recent years. In addition, the benchmarks for who qualifies for benefits have been raised to better cover the most vulnerable populations. For example, unless someone is over 62 years old, a veteran, an adult with a disability, or a survivor of domestic violence, they cannot even apply for Section 8. Given the nature of the current rental market, CAT's first priority is to prevent houselessness.

As with all their services, CAT's approach is holistic. Housing is one of the many puzzle pieces needed to create an accurate picture of a client's situation. CAT has many wrap-around services to help people. Other puzzle pieces include transportation, food, mental health, and social supports. Across the county and beyond, CAT partners with many governmental, community, and faith-based agencies that mutually strive to implement a "No Wrong Door" policy. So even if a family's needs are outside the scope of support that agency can provide, their case manager can point clients in the right direction and help them navigate an often confusing landscape. CAT is always a good place to start.

* Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individual featured.

To find out more about how Community Action Team might be able to help, please call 503-397-3511 or visit www.cat-team.org. Office hours at 125 N. 17th Street in St. Helens are 8:30 am – 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday.