

Housing insecurity in Madison spiraling out of control

Boys and Girls Club President Michael Johnson: "It's a citywide problem that we need to start seriously addressing."

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Published On: Jun 20 2016 09:40:15 AM CDT



Boys and Girls Club of Dane County President and CEO Michael Johnson doesn't often feel helpless, but that's exactly how he felt last week when very desperate single mothers were calling him and contacting him, seemingly non-stop, telling him that they and their children would soon be homeless and out on the street.

For the six-and-a-half years he's been in Madison, Johnson has become accustomed to lending a hand to people in need and connecting them with resources, but this was more than he could handle. He reached out to the village the fastest way people can nowadays — Facebook:

I received so many requests this month from single mothers reaching out saying they will be homeless within weeks and asking for help. What's going on in Madison? I have had to say no to so many mothers lately and it does not feel good. Wish I could raise more money in this space to help with short term support for women and their children. I am very sorry to the mothers BGC has not been able to help lately. Can those in housing services explain what's going on lately?

Over the last couple of years, the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County has set up a "special needs" fund to not only help their kids but to help their families who have fallen on hard times. It's something that Johnson takes very seriously.

"We've assisted people with funerals, temporary housing, hotels," Johnson says. "I feel like the word has spread

because at least a dozen mothers in the last month have contacted me with terrible stories about them losing housing as new landlords take over. I've heard story after story of people needing temporary help."

That special needs fund was quickly on the verge of being tapped out from all of the demand. That was part of the reason Johnson put the post out to the public through social media. It's something that he doesn't really like to do. But for a man who usually has all of the connections and all of the answers, he was feeling like he needed a little help himself.

"I knew by putting this out there that I would get this kind of response with people offering help, advice, and solutions. I know that a lot of people follow me on social media. I know that homelessness advocates will educate the public. I knew many of the parents who reached out to me," Johnson tells Madison365. "I'm very careful in terms of what I put out there. But I also learned a lot in the process. I want to be better educated on some of these issues and I don't like feeling defeated. When I can't help a young person and I can't help a family, it feels awful. It's a feeling of defeat and that's not in my DNA."

Some of the families that were in need of desperate housing help are Boys and Girls Club member families, others come from the greater overall community. Either way, it didn't matter to Johnson: He was going to get the women and children what they needed.

"I felt like when I made that post, I had just turned down three different mothers all in one day because I tapped out my funds," Johnson says. "Rarely does that happen. I'm always trying to figure something out. It doesn't feel good when there is a family that needs help and you can't help them."

Johnson says that non-profits agencies throughout Madison and Dane County do help a lot of people with housing issues like YWCA Madison, The Road Home, Salvation Army, Porchlight, and more, but that they are underfunded and understaffed to handle all of the need for housing in the city. "It's a much bigger problem than an agency. It's a citywide problem that we need to start seriously addressing," he says.

Jeanne Erickson, who is very active with low-income people on the margins of Madison through Club TNT and Project Babies, agrees that housing insecurity is reaching epic proportions among low-income people in Madison.

"What we've been seeing is really an increase in calls that we get and situations that we hear about of young, single moms who are out in the street and trying to get in shelters," she says. "They are doubling up and living in hotels and trying to figure out how to pay for it."

Erickson is the director of Project Babies, serving the needs of families with infants and young children since 2005, who provide information and activities that enable families to become proactive in their children's health and well-being.

"We've been doing this for a while now and we've seen almost a tripling or more of calls and requests from when we first started," Erickson says "So that's a big jump.

"We don't even have a true number on the amount of homeless people there are in Dane County," she adds. "But it's a high number."

It's hard to really get an exact number of the homeless people in Madison but there are plenty of anecdotes pointing towards it reaching crisis stage. Erickson says, for example, that from April 1-May 31st, the First United Methodist Church opened up an overflow shelter at their church in downtown Madison. "In that time, they served 101 families for overnight stays," Erickson says. "Those are families that couldn't get into the Salvation Army Warming Shelter because they only take 18 people.

"I think out of those 101 [families] there were 250 children housed in just those two months," she adds. "The significance of that is that had First United Methodist Church not opened up as an overflow shelter for families with children, those children would have been out on the street, in a car, sleeping wherever."

According to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data, the number of homeless children in the state rose 241 percent, from 5,354 in 2003 to 18,390 in 2015. All of the numbers don't even include "hidden homeless" families who are not living in shelters or on the street. Unrecorded by any homeless census, they move frequently, often into overcrowded apartments or double up with other families, usually as the result of a job loss, serious illness, escape from domestic violence or increases in living expenses that stretch their limited incomes to the breaking point.

Prior drivers of homelessness include poverty, violence, and mental health. Other factors include illness, physical disability, divorce or even an honorable discharge. For many, multiple factors combine to force an individual or family into crisis.

"It's complicated and there are multiple layers," Erickson says. "Certainly, job market. People not being able to get jobs that allow them to make enough money to get housing."

Erickson says that landlord/tenant laws that have been enacted over the last 6 years — over the last year and a half, in particular — by the Wisconsin State Legislature have decimated the tenant laws that the City of Madison had in place that were once protective of renters. All told, nearly 100 changes have been made to local and state rental laws since late 2011. Those new laws, along with landlords, also drew a lot of ire on Johnson's Facebook thread.

"So, now, when somebody is going for an apartment, they have to be able to show at least a 3 times their rent as far as income and no history of ANY type of late payments or anything. It's pretty much a landlords' market," Erickson says. "They can look at you for any reason and say, 'Ya know... I'm not going to rent to you.'

"Also, the eviction laws are now so very, very different," she adds. "There's no longer 'we're going to give you a 30-day notice.' They can evict somebody in five days. The landlords have the authority to be able to evict, dispose of your property, and if you come back on the property after those five days you can get charged with trespassing. There's really no protection whatsoever for our families."

"Evil landlords" have indeed taken a pounding on social media when it comes to images of women and children forced onto the streets of Madison, but Johnson stresses that he's heard the other side of it, too. "Some of the landlords have contacted me and said, 'Ya know, I have tried to help,'" Johnson says. "They also have a mortgage that they have to pay and when they own a unit that might have 12 apartments in it and 3 or 4 are not paying their rent, it can hurt. If you are a landlord and you aren't wealthy, I can definitely understand their

frustration. So, there needs to be some balance when we are assessing the blame.”

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Johnson says that it all comes down to the huge disparities — economic and much more often than not racial — that exist in Madison. “When people have low incomes or a felony on their record and can’t get affordable housing, these issues always come up,” he says. “In the six and a half years I’ve been in Madison, I’ve seen these issues but I’ve never received so many requests – back to back to back – like I am now.



“This, ultimately, goes way beyond the housing issue. There are issues of employment – us not training and hiring people of color. If they don’t have gainful employment, it impacts the entire family,” he adds. “It impacts them paying their rent, and once they miss payments, it impacts their credit. Their credit can prevent them from getting additional housing or a quality job. This ripple effect is devastating. We need to address this all as a community.”

Erickson says there are a lot of layers – she compares it to an onion when describing it – but a key problem is that there is simply just not enough affordable housing in Madison.

“I know that the City and County are really working towards a Housing First initiative which we definitely support,” says Erickson, who also serves as the secretary for the Homeless Services Consortium Board for Dane County. “It’s a great thing, but you have to have the housing order to get the people in there and that can’t happen overnight.”

Erickson, who is also on the Housing Committee for the NAACP of Dane County, says that she is hearing a lot of complaints of poor behavior by landlords around town. “We are also hearing complaints from the Oakwood Senior Center, how the seniors who have been in their housing for a very long time are all of sudden getting eviction notices because the building is being sold,” she says. “There’s no place for them to go. So, it’s at a crisis point for multiple age groups within the city.”

Johnson says economic gentrification, rising rents, and a landlords’ market all adding to the problem. Luxury and high-end development are historically high, while vacancy rates in recent years are historically low.

“You think of the vacancy rate here being 2 percent and the average rent – I had to guess – is about \$900 a month. If you’re making \$10 an hour, a large portion of your income is going to cover your rent,” he says. “That

becomes a big challenge. Ultimately, all of these factors are going to drive the low-income people out of this community.”

Temporarily, Johnson will do what he needs to take to stop the immediate bleeding, as he always does. “We will dedicate some of the money that we raise through our upcoming Boys and Girls Club Bike fundraiser to increased our emergency fund,” he says. “We always want to have the ability to be able to give somebody a hand up instead of a handout.”

And the response, since that Facebook post, has been great from the community. Johnson feels encouraged. “I’ve had people send me lengthy proposals on how to try and change legislation, I’ve had housing advocates, social workers, landlords reach out to me,” he says. “One landlord who saw my post reached out to one of the young ladies who was homeless and it looks like he’s helping her.”

But that’s all just immediate desperation help, putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound that, if not addressed significantly and comprehensively and soon, will only get much worse. More than anything, Johnson hopes that his Facebook post and the hundreds of responses to it increases the awareness and the need for action. Madison has the power to solve this problem, Johnson says, if they could only see it on a day-to-day basis and felt a visceral need to address it. Unfortunately, the segregation of the city causes it to be invisible to most Madisonians. They may read about it in the Wisconsin State Journal or Madison365, but it’s not in their face, every day, like it is for Johnson and others at the Boys and Girls Club.

“There are almost 1,400 kids in Madison that are homeless,” Johnson says. “How do we expect these kids – the future of our city – to succeed without stability in their lives? When you don’t know where you’re going to sleep at, where your next meal is going to come from ... who cares about school? You’re thinking about survival. How am I going to survive through today til tomorrow? That’s a huge challenge.

“Madison is becoming a large, metropolitan city and we need to begin to address very aggressively how we tackle these issues,” he adds. “Some of us do live in a bubble and simply don’t have any empathy or any emotional connection to the people who are suffering from these problems. And that’s a problem.”

Erickson agrees that it’s just not visible to your average Madison citizen.

“People are really surprised when I tell them that for priority to get into the warming shelter at the Salvation Army – you have priority if you have a baby that is under four months old,” Erickson says. “As soon as that baby is four months old, you no longer have priority. So, when your baby is 3 months and 30 days old, you might be a shelter that night, but the next night you could very well be on the street.

“The plight of people living in homelessness or on the verge of homelessness is something that most of us don’t see,” she adds. “I see people in families working 2 and 3 jobs just to make it and they are giving hotels tons and tons of money because that’s the only place that they can stay. I see people doubling up at little apartments. It is very scary when you don’t know where you are going to sleep at night ... especially for children.”

Johnson is preparing himself for more calls. He hopes the City and County will get on top of this, too, along with the citizens of Madison.

“But don’t get me wrong, I am still optimistic about this city ... as long as we continue to focus on the things that we need to focus on and to invest properly. In this community, we study stuff to death. When people come up with recommendations, somehow when it’s time to go through the budget process ... it all falls on deaf ears,” Johnson says. “We’ve got to hold people more accountable ... including myself. We have to make sure that we are moving the needles for those that we serve. That’s the bottom line.”

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