

Local homeless receive help

Area agencies find solutions to assist disadvantaged and poor in the Kirksville region

Chris Waller
Photo Editor

A homeless person is defined as someone who is on the street, in a shelter or sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation, according to the Missouri Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In Kirksville, this could be an abandoned building, campgrounds or even abandoned farms.

"I heard of a man who was living in a barn and running an extension cord from a nearby house for power," said Patti Preston, programs director for the Kirksville Housing Authority. "He has since passed away, I think, but he never came to us for help. There are a lot of people out there that never come to us."

Preston, who works with the Kirksville Housing Authority, spends most of her time working to find places to live for individuals and families without homes.

Even though she works with people who technically would be deemed homeless, she said the actual number of people in Kirksville without a home is hard to determine.

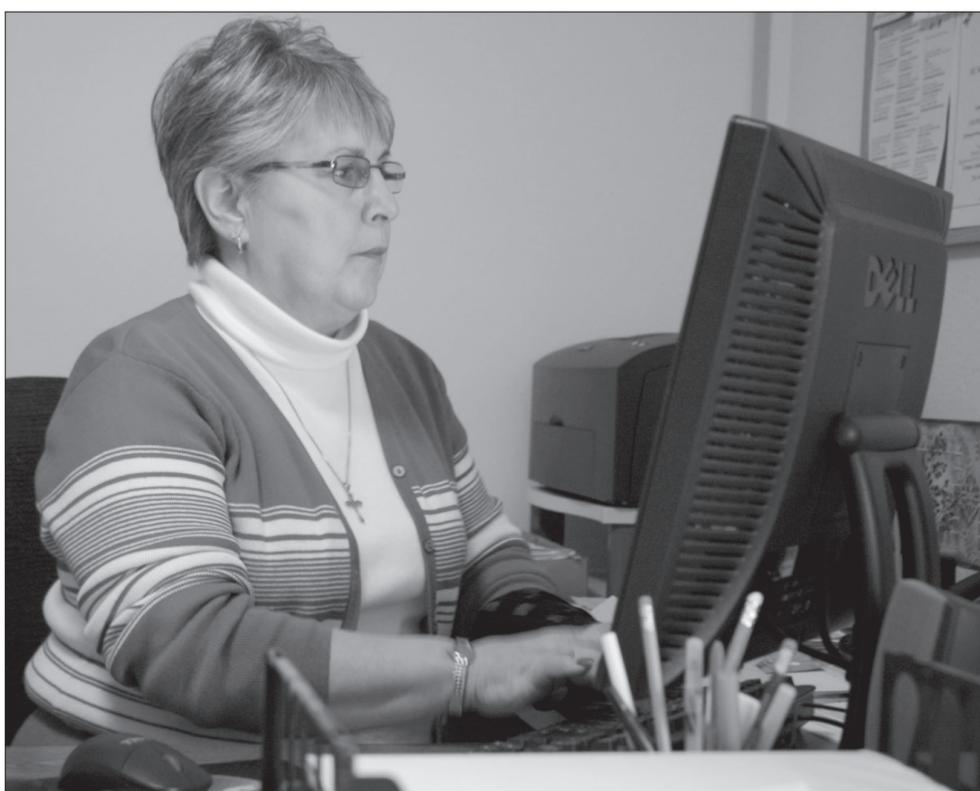
"I think there are more homeless individuals and families in our community than people realize," Preston said. "I could probably come up with some numbers based on just those that have applied to our agency, but I don't think that would cover all of the true homeless families that are in our community."

Preston said the kinds of people considered homeless are changing. Most people who apply for help from the housing commission are families and individuals, who for some reason or another have lost their current housing.

"We give preference to the elderly, we give preference to those who are displaced because of domestic violence, hate crimes, government actions or even their landlords," she said.

Preston said the economy and funding have a lot to do with how much the community can do for the homeless.

"We have seen in the last two or three years a growth in our applicants, and I think that's due in part to our economy," Preston said. "We have had several plants that have closed. We are funded by the federal government through Housing and



Chris Waller/Index
Evelyn Ledford, Adair County Service Center manager for the Northeast Missouri Community Action Agency, works on her office computer April 5. NMCAA works with homeless people around the area to find them affordable housing or places to stay while they find homes.

Urban Development, so we have to work with the money they allow us. We have enough funding to support approximately 200 families, and we have 126 public housing units, so that's only 326 families we can assist with our program."

Karia Basta, housing director for the Missouri Department of Mental Health, said she agrees that the face of the homeless is changing.

"This is a national average, but 42 percent of people who experience homelessness are employed," Basta said.

"Most people think that people who are homeless are not working. I've been working since the early '90s, and it's been my experience that more and more families are becoming

homeless, and most people who experience homelessness are under the age of 18 because they are part of families."

Basta works with the Governor's Committee to End Homelessness and with organizations working to end the problem statewide.

Basta said finding official statistics on the number of homeless in Kirksville and the state of Missouri is difficult, but the information does exist.

"We haven't had a study since 2001, but we are getting one done this year," Basta said. "In 2001, we had over 26,000 people homeless a day throughout the state, and that was both sheltered and unsheltered."

Basta also said she thinks the numbers of homeless are on the rise in the state.

"The previous study was done three years before 2001, and in that three-year period, there was a 48 percent increase in homelessness," Basta said. "From the little bit that we know, dif-

ferent areas do different studies, but we can't help but feel that the numbers are rising."

Basta said the main reason for an increase in homelessness is a change in the cost of living.

"Affordable housing in this country does not exist," she said. "If you give everyone a voucher today, and I handed one out to everyone who qualified, they could not find a place to use it. It's a two-pronged issue: There aren't enough subsidies, and there aren't enough places to live, and unfortunately, affordable housing is never on a political agenda, and so it's a hard issue to tackle."

Basta said that even though the problem of homelessness is becoming more prevalent, things are being done about it. Several organizations operate in Kirksville with the goal of ending homelessness in Adair County.

"We have a permanent housing pro-

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gram in Kirksville run by the Northeast Missouri Community Action Agency, and it's not a real big grant, but it is renewed every year," Basta said. "It's permanent, and Congress has set aside the money for us to use every year. Kirksville is one of my most steady programs. We have very low turnover, which means that these people are stable. And that's because the community action agency does a bang-up job of running the program."

Carrie Gaines, community resource developer for NMCAA, said the goal of her group is to provide help to those who need it.

"Primarily we serve the homeless through funds we receive from many programs, including the Department of Mental health and FEMA," Gaines said. "Right now, we have 12 people who were primarily homeless that are now housed."

Gaines said homelessness is on the rise in Kirksville despite groups trying to combat the problem.

"A lot of families are at risk of being homeless due to high energy costs and substandard housing," Gaines said. "We are in an economically depressed area, and there aren't a lot of jobs available. These are people who are on the edge with a job, then something happens, and especially if these people are mentally ill or are drug abusers."

Gaines said the problem of homelessness not only is a problem in Kirksville but also in the rest of the state. Many programs are being started statewide to help bring the homeless population of the entire state down.

"There is a system that is being operated called Homeless Missourian Information System," Gaines said. "It's in its infancy in our area. It's operated by Missouri Social Welfare, and it's designed to get information about the homeless. It's hard to find that information about this area, and that is definitely a weakness."

Gaines said that even though a lot is being done about the homeless, they will never know who isn't being helped.

"Our greatest concern is what we call the 'hidden homeless,'" Gaines said. "It includes the travelers, the people who are out walking, the mentally ill, the people who aren't looking for help."

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