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Focus is on effects of youth homelessness

By Joe Baker

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NEWPORT — The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island is \$928 a month. To keep the housing and utility costs to 30 percent of one's income, one would have to make \$37,139 a year to afford that apartment.

Those sobering statistics come from the 2014 Out of Reach report compiled by the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

For some families that means staying in shelters, bunking with friends or family or having no home at all. According to statistics from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, there were 1,277 children in homeless families in 2012, about 26 percent of all people who used emergency homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters or transitional housing. On Sunday, about two dozen people listened to a panel of professionals who deal with issues related to child homelessness. The seminar was sponsored by Newport County Citizens to End Homelessness and held at St. Mary's Church.

"This is serious. What we are doing to these children and these families is serious damage," said Judy Jones, a member of the citizens group. "And these effects can last a lifetime."

A popular misconception is that government supports protect people from living in extreme poverty. But waiting lists for subsidized housing can stretch up to five years, said Stephanie Geller, a policy analyst with KIDS COUNT. And the federal welfare program, formally known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, hardly helps families out of poverty, she said, noting a family of three can collect \$554 a month, a benefit that hasn't changed in more than 20 years.

The impacts of homelessness on children can be devastating and long-lasting, the panelists agreed.

Children without a home are more likely to develop health problems from a lack of proper nutrition. They often miss school, depriving them of the opportunity education provides to break the cycle of poverty. It leads many to substance abuse and a life of crime.

Gary P. Cournoyer is an administrator with the Newport County Community Mental Health Center who once was a counselor at the Rhode Island Training School. Every winter the detention facility saw a handful of youth who committed crimes so they could get off the street

and into a warm place where they got three meals a day, he said.

“There is a traumatic impact (of homelessness) on these kids,” Cournoyer said. “The light in their eyes just isn’t there. They’ve become numb.”

“It’s instability like you wouldn’t believe,” said Rebekah Gomez, family services coordinator with the Newport School Department.

The stress level is higher in homeless families, and that leads to arguments and even violence, she said. Homeless kids can’t have any normal life outside of school. They can’t have friends over to play. They don’t have any place to do their homework, and that often leads to truancy problems, Gomez said.

Lucy’s Hearth, an emergency shelter in Middletown that can accommodate 10 families, is housing 24 children right now, program director Jennifer Barrera said. They range from 3 weeks to 17 years, she said. The shelter provides mental health counseling, transportation to and from school and homework help.

“We try to provide structure. These kids thrive with a regular routine,” Barrera said.

The lack of any routine or normalcy throws the lives of homeless children into a state of chaos that can continue even if the family eventually gets a home, the experts said.

“One young adolescent was afraid to even go to school because she feared her mother wouldn’t be there when she got home from school,” Cournoyer said.

“Two things all children need are a sense of safety and a sense of permanentness,” Jones said.

“The simplest things we take for granted just aren’t there for these kids. If (homelessness) was a rash epidemic we’d be all over it. And this is much more damaging than that.”

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