



Aug. 24, 2017

COMMENTARY

Chloe Learey: Homelessness is a year-round issue

Editor's note: This commentary is by Chloe Learey, the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. She serves on the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council, a governor-appointed body that advises the Administration and Legislature on early childhood care, health and education systems. You can learn more by visiting winstonprouty.org.

Finding a solution for the seasonal overflow shelter (SOS) in Brattleboro for the upcoming winter season is a relief for many in the community. The primary purpose of the SOS is to provide warm shelter for those who have no place to go during the coldest months. We are not a community that let's our fellow citizens face exposure and possible death because they do not have a home.

While the potential dangers of exposure are increased during the winter months, the risks of homelessness are occurring year-round. Specifically, children who are homeless are vulnerable to experience many complicating issues that impact their physical and emotional health. Unfortunately, this impact can have long term, cumulative effects over the course of a lifetime.

The impact of homelessness on child development occurs before a child is born. Pregnant women who are homeless are at higher risk of experiencing a lack of prenatal care, poor nutrition, and chronic stress; all of which can impact the development of their baby. These infants are more likely to have a low birth rate, to not receive regular check-ups and immunizations, and to live in a stressful environment. All of these are risk factors for a child not developing optimally, particularly the elements of a stressful environment, and can have an adverse impact on brain development.

A child's brain is developing very rapidly in the earliest years; 80% of brain development happens by age 3 and 90% by age 5. Having children in positive environments that support that development creates the strong foundation they need to be successful in school and beyond.

Children who are homeless are more at risk for not having adequate food, being exposed to or directly experiencing violence, being separated from their families and placed in foster care, a system that is not ideal for child development. These experiences create chronic stress and produce a physiological response that weakens the ability of children to develop optimally.

A report from the Family Housing Fund, "Homelessness and its Effect on Children"

(<http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>) notes that by 18 months, children who are homeless often begin to demonstrate a regression in speech and toilet training, and ultimately 75% of homeless children under the age of 5 have at least one major developmental delay, while 44% have 2 or more major developmental delays. These children are also less likely to be enrolled in an early education program that is one of the environments that could counter some of these negative effects. Clearly homelessness is not good for children.

Finding housing is not enough. Supportive services are also important. The risk factors associated with homelessness do damage to families, not just children, and it is critical that we work to offset those damages to create the positive environments necessary for children to develop optimally. We believe that all families want to do what is right for their child. Understanding what children need to learn and grow will help families provide that environment. Certainly stable housing is part of that foundation, but there are other services needed as well, including: long-term supportive housing, substance abuse and mental health treatment, access to health services, parenting education specifically for families who may not have experienced a supportive childhood, after-school and academic support, and nutritional support (<http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>, p.10).

The report from the Family Housing Fund outlines several strategies for maximizing those services. It is exciting that some of these supportive services are being embedded in Groundworks' shelters, creating continued possibilities for making progress on ending homelessness in our community.

As we prepare for winter it is imperative that we keep the larger picture of the impact homelessness has year-round. The responsibility for building solutions and making a difference belongs to all of us.

https://vtdigger.org/2017/08/24/chloe-learey-homelessness-year-round-issue/?utm_source=VTDigger+Subscribers+and+Donors&utm_campaign=69ea7bf046-Weekly+Update&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_dc3c5486db-69ea7bf046-405515661#.WZ_KkEpCEc