

The Republican Journal – June 15, 2023

By Robert Johansen

“Sound responses to homelessness in Maine can start small,” proclaimed the headline of a May 25 Republican Journal editorial. The piece, reprinted from the Portland Press Herald, promotes a number of short-term possibilities for addressing the housing and homelessness crisis while awaiting permanent housing construction.

I couldn’t agree more. The national housing crisis requires multiple solutions, some applicable to urban situations and others well suited to rural homelessness and small cities like Belfast.

“You mean there are homeless people in Belfast?” I was asked this many times last November while helping to organize the “Community Conversation on Homelessness,” an event cosponsored by WaldoCAP, the Belfast Soup Kitchen, But Still I Am One, and my own agency, Family Promise of MidCoast Maine.

Forty-five people gathered at the Soup Kitchen and heard sobering stories of youth and adult homelessness and the challenge of finding housing. The questions about homeless people in Belfast led to a six-week course I co-taught at Senior College this spring called, “The Neighbors You Don’t Know.”

Having worked for 20 years in large men’s and women’s shelters in Boston, even I didn’t see it at first. Urban homeless stereotypes don’t apply here. But working at the Soup Kitchen, I met a number of folks who lived in tents, unheated sheds, cars and campers, or doubled and tripled up with “friends.”

Let me assure you that, yes, there are men, women, children and youth experiencing homelessness right here in “our town Belfast” and throughout the Midcoast.

Last year the Belfast General Assistance office processed 243 housing assistance applications for a total of 346 people: 155 men, 135 women, and 30 families with a total of 55 children. Funds earmarked for homelessness prevention and rental assistance saved some from ending up unhoused. Many others were referred to local motels

offering a roof over their heads but not much more. But even those options were quickly maxed out.

At the end of May this year the GA office had 30 people on its waiting list, including seven families with 10 children. What has become of them? There are no individual or family homeless shelters in Waldo County.

But there are other options, including one with a proven track record of placing thousands of families in housing over the past 30 years. Known as Family Promise after the national organization that developed it, this cost-effective model engages local communities in providing temporary shelter for small numbers of families experiencing homelessness.

Family Promise has shown nationally that by providing volunteer support and wrap-around community professional services, 80% of families served by Family Promise affiliates have found permanent housing within nine weeks.

There are many underutilized buildings in our community. Churches, though well-used on weekends, often sit near empty during the week. Likewise, many community meeting places, fraternal lodges, and community centers are underutilized much of the time when they could be used for temporary overnight shelter.

The Family Promise model operates on a small scale, working with local hosts who provide temporary accommodations for up to four families for a week at a time, four weeks out of the year. On a rotating basis, the four families are transported each evening from a day center to a local congregation or community site where they are welcomed by volunteers, served a hot meal, given space to socialize and do homework, and then given space to spend the night together as a family. In the morning a simple breakfast is served, often with a bag lunch for workers or kids who won't have other options.

The families are gone by 7:30 a.m. and return around 5:30 in the evening. This continues for a week at a time at each site. At the end of the week the families, plus their cots, bedding, etc., are transported to another site for the following week. Through coordination of host sites, families are assured a safe place to stay for the time it takes to find

housing. Plus the system leaves host sites free to continue using their buildings for the total week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

During the day children attend school while adults work and meet with appropriate case managers or counselors to help address issues that might create problems maintaining housing. All families are screened for substance use, domestic violence and mental health by Family Promise staff and connected with appropriate case managers and counselors in community agencies.

Participation and follow-through with counseling is a condition of being in the program. For both adults and children, unstructured time during the day is spent at the day center where showers and laundry facilities are available.

The Family Promise approach has become a national movement. Across the country, more than 2,000 congregations in 43 states have embraced this model, seeing it as a way to make a difference locally, show love for their neighbors and live out their ministry. Other community organizations have stepped up because they understand that homelessness affects all of us.

There are now over 200 local affiliates across the country. Collectively they are the largest provider of services to families experiencing homelessness in the country. Each affiliate is a separate nonprofit, engaging the local community of volunteers, host sites and other nonprofits.

Currently, seven New England affiliates operate in Connecticut, Metro Boston, New Hampshire and Greater Portland. The newest, Family Promise of MidCoast Maine, is in start-up mode, actively recruiting local congregations and organizations to help shelter families by next winter. For more information, visit our website: familypromiseofmidcoastme.org/

Yes, "sound responses to homelessness in Maine can start small." And through the kind of community spirit Belfast and Waldo County have demonstrated over and over again during the pandemic, during economic ups and downs, during good times and bad, small efforts can yield big results, even a future where every child and every family has the safe home they deserve.

Robert Johansen is the board chair of Family Promise of MidCoast Maine. He is also a retired parish minister active with the Greater Bay Area Ministerium.