Homelessness proves to be vexing problem

By THATCHER MOATS STAFF WRITER

MONTPELIER – The only homeless shelter in central Vermont is overflowing, has been for months, and regularly has to turn people away.

Local officials and area residents attended a community discussion in Montpelier Thursday night to examine ways to help the shelter and deal with the numbers of homeless in the area, a pressing problem that has no easy solution.

Held at the Bethany Church in Montpelier, the meeting was attended by Kim Woolaver, who described her experiences as executive director of the Good Samaritan Haven, a 21-bed emergency shelter in Barre, where she took over eight months ago.

Woolaver told the group of about 10 people at the meeting that 27 or 30 people come seeking shelter each day, and more might come, but they know the place is full, so they don't even try.

"Even right now, as nice as the weather has been, we're over capacity," she said.

Some of those who can't get a bed at the shelter stay at the Hedding United Methodist Church in Barre, she said, an arrangement that has existed since December.

In addition to high numbers, people are staying at the shelter for longer, Woolaver said.

"I'm not talking weeks. I'm talking months," she said, noting sometimes the time is as long as seven to 10 months.

She is currently struggling to find an alternate site for the "emergency overflow" of people because the arrangement with Hedding is expiring, she said.

The First Presbyterian Church in Barre has agreed to house homeless people, Woolaver said, but she is fighting their insurance company, which won't allow it.

The number of homeless people seeking beds "hasn't gone down a lot and it makes me nervous, because if we can't find an alternate site for the emergency overflow, I don't know what we can do," she said.

Woolaver said after the meeting that it's hard for her to gauge if the overflow is an increase, because she has only been at the shelter for eight months. And before she started housing people at the church, there already were more people at the shelter than it could hold. Volunteer staff members allowed them to sleep on the dining room floor, she said.
Putting a stop to that practice forced her to seek the extra beds.

Statewide data indicates that the number of people who are homeless and "precariously housed" has jumped rapidly in the past two years.

"Point-in-time" data is gathered on one January day each year when service agencies around the state count homeless people at shelters and other places. Probation and parole officers, for instance, count people under their supervision who they know are homeless or near homeless. (Vermont counts precariously housed people – those who are couch surfing, for instance.)

That data shows that in Washington County, the total more than doubled from 2007 to 2008 and then dipped just slightly in 2009, according to the 2009 annual report by the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness.

In 2007, 72 people were counted in Washington County while there were 167 in 2008 and 162 in 2009. (In 2009, 88 of the 162 were actually homeless and not precariously housed.) The 2010 count has been done but the report is not yet finished.

In 2009, the statewide total of homeless was 2,666.

An emergency homelessness hotline in Vermont followed the same trend.

City Councillor Jim Sheridan, a founding member of the Montpelier Housing Task Force, gave some anecdotal evidence of tough times. He noted that his mother works at a food pantry in Montpelier and tells him people are trying to get food more often than they are allowed and in some cases are lying about how many people are in their family.

"They're desperate to get more food," he said.

Sheridan said he has seen many homeless people during the 17 years he has lived in downtown Montpelier. They have slept in stairwells of the apartment buildings he has lived in. Walking downtown at night he has seen them pushing carts, he said, and sleeping under bridges.

"They're out there," he said.

The inability to get the kind of jobs that allow people to afford an apartment is a huge problem, Woolaver said.

She said she has watched as places like Walmart and McDonald's hire and train people and then cut their hours.

"You can't live on eight or 10 hours a week at minimum wage," she said.

Woolaver said she has also watched people get sucked into a financial hole and struggle to
get out.

A man from Maine who has been staying at the Good Samaritan Haven, moved to Vermont because he had a job lined up, according to Woolaver. That fell through and so did his arrangement to stay with friends, she said.

He fell behind on child support payments in Maine, and then the state of Maine took away his license for failure to pay child support, she said. He was a truck driver, she added, so he can't make money the way he traditionally has, so he hasn't been able to find housing. She said he and some other residents at the shelter don't fit the stereotype of mentally ill or drug-addicted homeless people.

"That's not the case. Some are just down on their luck," she said.

Three Montpelier City Councilors, members of the Montpelier Housing Task Force, and other area residents attended the meeting.

What they ultimately decided was to help organizations like the Good Samaritan Haven and Washington County Youth Services Bureau that are already established.

"How do we support what we have?" asked Rick DeAngelis, a Montpelier resident.

One idea was to look into the possibility of an emergency overflow shelter in Montpelier. Another idea was to consider some kind of daytime shelter where homeless people can go during the day and be more productive than they are now.

Woolaver said transportation would be the key to having an emergency overflow shelter in Montpelier and supervision would be important to having a daytime shelter.

The group also decided to try to raise awareness and get area residents to volunteer at the Good Samaritan Haven, which Woolaver said would be more than welcome.

"I'm in dire need," she said.