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EDITOR'S PICK SPECIAL REPORT

Rising homelessness should be wake-up call to Wisconsin leaders, advocates say

From the Homeless in Madison | A City Challenged series

DEAN MOSIMAN and DOUG ERICKSON | Wisconsin State Journal 17 min ago



Decades of inadequate leadership and insufficient direct funding from the state have weakened the fight against rising homelessness in Wisconsin.

Advocates and service providers say state officials must be more engaged to address an often hidden plight that shatters lives and creates significant costs for social services, schools, health care and law enforcement.

There's no precise way to measure homelessness, but a State Journal review of data make clear that its scope is broad — affecting infants to seniors and all demographics.



By one estimate, perhaps 20,000 people are homeless in Wisconsin on any given night. One count shows the ranks of homeless single adults growing by nearly 25 percent since 2007. Another has the number of homeless children more than tripling since 2003.

State officials say Wisconsin spends tens of millions of dollars on homelessness. But the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness and local officials and providers disagree, contending that most of the money isn't targeted directly at the issue. The state essentially has delivered no new direct funding for two decades, with the sum long stuck at about \$3.3 million, the coalition says.

That sum is more than Iowa's \$1 million in direct funding, but it's dwarfed by the \$44.3 million in direct funding in Minnesota — seen as a gold standard of investment and approach in the Midwest — according to a coalition analysis from mid-2015 updated by the State Journal. In far more populous Illinois, the figure is at \$49.5 million.

Wisconsin officials insist the state is doing a lot, and that funding only appears comparatively low because resources that can benefit the homeless aren't all specifically labeled that way and flow through multiple agencies.

The coalition, forged just 18 months ago, insists more must be done. This week it is releasing "A Roadmap to Ending Homelessness in Wisconsin" with specific policy and budget recommendations.

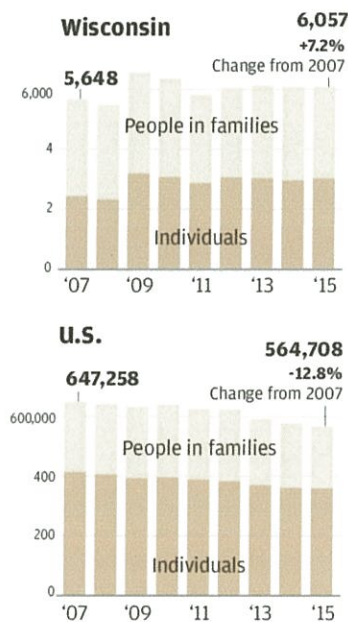
At a minimum, the state should triple its dedicated funding to \$10 million, said coalition executive director Joseph Volk, who said Wisconsin has fallen behind others in addressing homelessness in part because service providers haven't advocated at the Capitol for a long time.

As the coalition presses its case, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, a Republican, is publicly making homelessness a priority and fact-finding in anticipation of offering ideas in the fall.

Kleefisch and her staff, who in recent months have visited housing and program sites and had multiple discussions with Volk, aren't endorsing coalition recommendations or promising new funds — at least not yet. In a recent interview about possible initiatives, several times she promised, "Stay tuned."

Number of homeless people

Over recent years the number of homeless people in Wisconsin is trending up, while the nation is seeing a decline.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development State Journal