

Homeless in Fort Collins

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My presentation will be a “bird’s eye overview” of homelessness in Fort Collins.

I had volunteered for five years at Homeward Alliance f/k/a Homeless Gear for five years prior to the pandemic. It was a well meaning but barely effective answer to homelessness in Fort Collins. I say “barely effective” only in retrospect because it met far fewer needs of the homeless than Homeward Alliance does now. Now it is cooperating with a large network of services also serving, at least in part, the needs of the Homeless.

When I started in 2015 Homeless Gear had six employees as well as some volunteers. In about 2016 about five organizations decided that they could provide more effective services if they combined under one roof. This would make it more convenient for homeless people who had been visiting services in different parts of town. The “roof” was the Murphy Center which had been providing services to the homeless for several years in a building in Northern Fort Collins. The name was changed to “Homeward Alliance”. By 2017 or 2018 The paid staff had approximately tripled to about 18. Now I have learned that Homeward Alliance consists of 40 employees and 20+ cooperating agencies including Neighbor to Neighbor. Much of this growth must have occurred during the Pandemic.

Since This is a sermon and not a report I won’t give any more Statistics. Much factual information can be found on Homeward Alliance’s home page on Facebook.

I will focus on myths about the homeless, needs of the homeless now being at least partially met in Fort Collins, and examples of a few homeless people.

Since this is a sermon I should say something religious. This is actually wise guy territory. There is a list going around with a few words that describe each religion. It is called "stuff happens" except the word isn't stuff. Protestantism is that if "stuff happens" it should happen to someone else. For Catholics it is if "stuff happens" it is your own fault. Either way it amounts to "Social Darwinism." Darwin's "survival of the fittest" was supposed to be about the evolution of turtles not letting people die because they can't compete.

There is a huge amount of information about the homeless. I think that the Denver Post had a multi part series some time ago. I think that the Fort Collins Coloradoan did also. There are also regular article in newspapers. Noteworthy is how the Courts are all over the place on homeless issues. It is like rolling the dice. Apparently camping is okay in Fort Collins but not in Denver.

The myth that I hear most often is that "some homeless prefer to be homeless". None of the homeless prefer to be homeless. It is hot as hell in the summer and cold as the other side of a pillow in the winter. Either way the daily activities include worrying about where you are going to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom. Many are reconciled to their fate.

Obvious reasons for homelessness are no education or training. More subtle reasons are poor dental work or poorly placed tattoos. It is hard to not look homeless if you are missing teeth or have bad dental work.

Pets are another issue. It can be difficult to find a home or a job if you have a pet. It can be a deal breaker. Being homeless is preferable to not having their pet. They are together 24 hours every day. Now that recently they are finding apartments some landlords may be lenient. There have been many changes at Homeward Alliance since I was last there.

Another myth is that homeless people are dangerous. They are actually as meek as a hummingbird or kitten or whatever. They are the opposite of aggressive which can be a disadvantage when looking for a job. Prospective employers are probably looking for some apparent confidence. I worked in the clothing and gear department for about three years or more. We have a panic button that we can hit if we are in danger. I only hit it twice and both times it was when a homeless person (we call them guests) was having a seizure.

One of the many other myths that I have heard came up at my Kiwanis meeting where I had invited a speaker. He had heard that homeless people flock to Fort Collins because of the superior services available. (Sort of a homeless haven or maybe Hilton (my embellishment.) Statistics don't show any influxes. Homeless people don't think that way and are immobile any way. They would not drive from Minneapolis to Fort Collins for homeless services.

Another myth is that the homeless take up too many police and city resources. All that I hear is one side of this that being the guest's side. I tend to think that it is exaggerated. I know that one person is repeatedly arrested for smoking marijuana in public. He always tells the Judge that he lives in public. From the little bit that I know some police forces emphasize Statistics. How did you fill your time that day. Police have tremendous power. They can just let people go which might many times be the best option for the entire system.

Bail bonds are a whole different story. It is a nationwide problem of jailing poor people because they can't make bond. You can wait a week in jail for a \$50 fine. The UU bail bonds project has dealt with this problem for immigrants. One bottom line that does not seem to be considered is that jail is like a day at the beach for some of them. It is no deterrent.

As far as the needs of the homeless the most critical need is a home. That is why they are homeless. They don't have a home. The new system largely developed this past year I think is the network of resources such as churches new and old shelters Catholic Charities, Neighbor to Neighbor, homeless projects like Mason Place and Red Tail Ponds.

The following are some of the needs of the homeless. Many are being met by Homeward Alliance but this is meant to highlight the needs of the homeless rather than an infomercial for Homeward Alliance.

1. When people check in each morning they get bus passes and a very modest breakfast i.e oatmeal and breakfast bars. There are condoms on the counter since pregnancy is not something that a homeless person needs or wants
2. Mail. Homeless people need a place to get mail for all of the obvious reasons. Checks, employer contacts, contact with family etc.

3. Phones. Most have their own phones but sometimes phones are donated for 911, employer contacts etc.
4. access to computers largely for job searches,etc
5. Lockers are available for one month. The guests have 5 minutes to put in or remove contents. The lockers are small. All of this may have changed within the last year.
6. Showers. There is a lottery each morning for showers. Facilities are also there to shave.
7. Laundry. There may be a lottery also. Hours have expanded from 4 to 7 hours now so that may make it better for laundry needs
8. Food. Very skimpy. Breakfast and lunch with power bars fruit crackers etc. they get a breakfast and a lunch.
9. Clothing. This is where I worked the longest time.. It is mostly donations. Much of the time is spent saying "no". There is a limited number of items that they can get each month, shoe and coat sizes are hard to match. Sleeping bags, tents and backpacks are limited to one per year and go fast each day. We tell them to come early in the morning because most are taken within an hour. People living in cars can only have a blanket not a sleeping bag.
10. Government forms as everyone knows are like a jigsaw puzzle. They are frequently eligible for Medicaid and SSDI. Some need help in establish ID so birth certificates need to be tracked down. Volunteers help with this task
11. Job Counseling is critical. It didn't used to be universally available. It was screened. This has apparently really improved in the last year. Now there are case managers to handle group and individual needs. Vets, felons, Spanish speakers and former drug users now each have specialists

When I took Court appointments as an attorney for Juvenile Court my clients were like the penthouse of the poor. Almost all had addresses, many lived in mobile homes some had apartments but frequently moved, some lived with extended families or shared homes with other families.

Homeward alliance people live outdoors or in cars, or in shelters, some have tents which can be kind of a luxury. Now some have apartments for those who qualify. Qualification for Homeward Alliance services is by income so some people have jobs or even fulltime jobs and still live in their cars.

The most chronically homeless people are the ones below Homeward Alliance clients. They are long time homeless who have given up. Drug addicts, mentally ill, suspicious people who just don't trust anyone, hitchhikers, people without IDs. They still get services through "street outreach. A van goes out a few times every week with food clothing etc.

Examples of individual homeless people:

The first two are blessed.

1 Tom was homeless for 40years. Half of the time he was in jail. He was 58 so he was homeless since high school. He had all sorts of medical needs. He had heart problems. It is third hand hearsay but it allegedly came from him that he was bi polar. That would explain an unstable life. With help with paperwork he apparently got SSDI with 40K retroactive, an apartment for life and an income.

2. Walter is on the Homeward Alliance Facebook page. He is a 65 year old black man. God only knows how long he was homeless. He got a home at Mason Place with a bathroom, a sink and a living room. He is ecstatic. He was a great guy. Always sang to us. Always seemed up. When he left I said that he should come back and visit sometime. He said bullshit I ain't ever coming back here. That was the real self that he had hidden. Not happy at all.

3. Sally. The first time I saw her she was well dressed and groomed but very indecisive. She quickly started down hill and kept going. I strongly suspect drugs. Dyed her hair. Skull and cross bone clothes. Still indecisive. Tragically a poor prognosis I would guess.

Larry. A victim. Probably was a Vet. Lost part of a lower leg. Possibly PTSD. High maintenance. Size 13 shoes. Hard to find. Hung around a lot. Devastated when he came out of an evaluation showing that he was operating at a fifth grade level. Too discouraged to even look for a job. Just not ready.

4. The mystery woman. Staff couldn't tell us her story but she really did not look like she belonged there. Had a back pack etc but way too well dressed and generally unlike the others. Looked suburban. Didn't talk to anyone but got some special treatment. I speculated that she may have been a battered woman. There are probably few places to hide in Fort Collins. Then she was

gone one day and I hope that she went to live with family out of state or somewhere and not back to the perpetrator if she was battered.

The homeless need homes before they can even begin to work on all other issues. It is a steep hole to dig out of. Hopefully with the new network of agencies and organizations some of them will get much needed assistance. They may have a better chance here than elsewhere.

I recently saw an article that talked about Jesus saying that “the poor will always be with us.” That is frequently interpreted as being resigned to the fact that nothing can be done about it. The article said that taken in context it means just the opposite. The latter interpretation seems more likely in any context.

There are numerous volunteers at Homeward Alliance. Hundreds including some who only volunteer once every year. Most have been out because of the pandemic including me. I hope to be back there soon.