

Recession's invisible victims

Homeless population searches for services

Editor's note: The following is the second in a two-part series examining the homeless population and their needs in Goshen County. Part one ran June 25.

By John Miller

Staff writer

Jeff and Terry Conlon are old hands when it comes to living at Pioneer Park. Jeff says this is the fifth time in the last two years they have resorted to pitching their tent here, and they are the new "neighbors" of the Donathan family.

"Us homeless folks need to stick together," quips Barry Donathan as they share an uneasy chuckle over their situation.

Jeff and Terry were both recently released from prison, Jeff for a sexual offense and Terry for substance abuse. They said there are two churches willing to donate the money necessary for them to rent housing, but a prerequisite to signing a lease is employment. And neither one has been able to find a job.

"Mostly there just aren't

any (jobs)," Jeff said. "But others say they just won't hire a felon. I just want to work. We're not asking for a handout."

"We thought about staying to live here, but there aren't any jobs," Donathan said. "With all of my experience in criminal justice I figured the prison would take me right away. But they said my credit score wasn't high enough. I can't understand what that has to do with doing your job well."

The couple has managed to obtain food from the local

ministries, but their options are even more limited because they don't have children.

"We've had several places tell us they're only helping us because of them," Donathan said, referring to his kids. "They said they could care less about us (Donathan and wife Tammy)."



Gary Sloane of Riverside Church of Christ has files full of families who have turned to Riverside, Land of Goshen

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Ministries or Torrington Care and Share for assistance. Last year, 417 families received assistance in the form of food by these organizations. This year, already 283 families, including 212 children, have applied for the food baskets.

"Homeless today is not the same as it was 20 years ago," Sloane said. "I don't think we ever meet all the people who need help. But if you have families living in the park, there's definitely a problem."

Brent Anderson

of KOH Security in Scottsbluff, Neb. has spent much of his adult life helping the homeless. Among his accomplishments are securing \$1,765,000 to finance homeless youth shelters, transitional housing for pregnant and parenting homeless youth and street outreach services in Scottsbluff.

"Eighty-five to 95 percent of homeless in rural areas are born there," Anderson said. "There are very few transient homeless in these areas. That means that the majority are locals who have hit hard

times. In many ways, they're the most invisible of the homeless."

The Yoder resident researches what type of programs work best in rural areas and how to implement them as low-cost, self-sustaining endeavors.

"To land a HUD grant requires an active CoC (Continuum of Care) account with them," Anderson said. But any non-profit community action, with the necessary documentation, can apply for one."

Anderson's research also shows the traditional model of shel-

ter, one large room with lots of cots, perform poorly in rural areas. Families especially need privacy, even when housed in a group setting.

"One model that seems to work best is a renovated old hotel," Anderson said. "Everyone has their own unit as opposed to a congregated shelter. And with everyone managing their own space, you don't need a shelter supervisor 24 hours a day."

Another idea he had specifically with Torrington in mind involved the old campsite next

to Riverside Church of Christ. By renovating the cabins, a large portion could be rented out to campers and tourists, while a smaller portion could be used as one and two-room shelters. The rentals would offset the cost of keeping the shelters operational.

"The key is to look at long-term sustainability," Anderson said. "We simply don't know how attainable grants are going to be in 10 years."



By Tuesday afternoon, Barry Donathan and his family had received over 500

pounds of food, courtesy of the people of Goshen County. It was far more than him and his family needed, so he gave much of it away to other homeless people living at Pioneer Park.

One donor objected to this, complaining one of the recipients was a drunk. After what they've been through, the Donathans refuse to differentiate.

"It doesn't matter what they've done," said Tammy. "They're all people. They need to eat."

"They're not invisible to us."