

LOCAL

Debunking homelessness myths: Asheville experts take on 5 common misconceptions



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ASHEVILLE - No one's story is the same. It's true of most things, but Debbie Alford, a homeless strategy specialist with the city, said it of homelessness in Asheville.

The topic has climbed to the top of City Council's strategic priorities, heightened as population numbers rose in the wake of the pandemic, with unsheltered homelessness seeing a 163% increase from pre-pandemic numbers.

It's also a topic awash in misinformation, said Safe Shelter Director Christian Chambers, something he attributes to the rising visibility of homelessness, further exacerbated by the influx of newcomers to the city.

Alford often deals in these myths, and her new Homelessness Learning Series is working to debunk several of them. The three-part education series focuses on causes, responses and actions that surround homelessness in Asheville and Western North Carolina.

Below, several homeless services experts weigh in on five frequent assumptions around homelessness heard in Asheville and beyond.

Myth: Homelessness is caused by substance use or mental illness

It's a common misconception, Alford said, that mental health and addiction are the fundamental causes of homelessness. It goes hand-in-hand with the narrative that all people experiencing homelessness are "addicts" or suffering mental health crises.

She points to research by Gregg Colburn, author of "Homelessness is a Housing Problem," who along with data journalist Clayton Aldern, sought to explain the substantial variation in rates of homelessness apparent in cities across the country.

Researchers tested a range of conventional beliefs about what drives the prevalence of homelessness in a given city, said its website, including mental illness, drug use, poverty, weather, generosity of public assistance and low-income mobility.

"Contrary to expectations," they found rates of homelessness tend to be lower where poverty rates are higher. There was no direct correlation between rates of homelessness and drug use, mental illness or the other examples named.

When illustrated on a graph, only housing-related factors, including median rent and rental vacancy rates, correlated with regional rates of homelessness.

As Alford puts it, while mental health crises and substance use can set people up to be more vulnerable, often developing or worsening while experiencing homelessness, they are considered "precipitating factors," along with things like trauma and natural disaster.

But the true cause, she said, is lack of housing.

"If we had enough housing, it wouldn't matter if a person had a mental health disorder or uses substances, because there's plenty of people that are housed that have those issues going on in their life as well," Alford said.

Further complicating the conversation is that for many people, unsheltered and chronic homelessness — often the most visible kinds — are the experiences they are more likely to see and stereotype.

Of the three types of homelessness Alford named — short-term, episodic and chronic — chronic homelessness is the smallest category, representing 21% of Buncombe County's total homeless population, according to the 2023 point in time count.

More: Asheville homeless count numbers released. How do they compare to pre-COVID levels?

Chronic homelessness is defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as someone who has a disabling condition — such as a diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness or disability — and has either been continuously homeless for a year or more or had four episodes of homelessness in the last three years.

The majority of people resolve their crisis in a matter of weeks, Alford said. But people won't remember the homelessness they didn't see: someone doubled up on a friend's couch, sleeping in their car or staying in a motel.

Marcus Laws, director at AHOPE, Homeward Bound's downtown day center, said pointing to drug or alcohol use is a "go-to excuse" to not engage or not help.

"It's an easy thing to pick out and say, 'this is why they can't get it together,'" Laws said.

In truth, he said, "when you don't have a stable support network or people you can count on, all it takes is a bad accident or mounting bills and the inability to pay those bills to lead to financial instability and eventually homelessness."

Myth: Homeless people are bused into Asheville/aren't 'from here'

The rumor that unhoused people are being bused into Asheville from other communities is longstanding. It's a myth that has a hold in cities across the country, reporting from the Citizen Times found. Alford said Asheville has even received calls from other municipalities accusing them of busing homeless populations to them, in turn.

"That's not a thing that's happening," Alford said. It doesn't play out in the data either, she said.

Asheville's latest point in time count, a single night census taken each year in January, found that over 70% of people experiencing homelessness last had housing in Asheville (55.7%) or in Western North Carolina (15.3%). Of the rest, 7.6% had housing in other areas of North Carolina and 21.4% from out of state.

More: Fact checking the Asheville busing myth: Are homeless people being bused into the city?

Myth: There's enough shelter space to house everyone who wants it

Within its first week, Safe Shelter, a new 20-bed shelter in downtown, was already at capacity, Chambers said. Three weeks since opening, its waiting list is pushing 70 names.

Other shelters are in a similar boat. It's simple, he said: "There's not enough room."

Even when there is shelter space, Laws said, someone may not be eligible. Barriers might include a pet, being part of a couple, lack of ID, sobriety status or perception of safety. A bad experience with one shelter may stop someone from seeking out a bed at another.

“Our shelter beds remain pretty full,” Alford said. If vacancy rates are low for the area's housing, they're also low for shelter beds. “We don't have beds that are sitting vacant in shelters.”

A study conducted by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, presented to the city and county in January, found that in 2022, of the 293 total year-round emergency shelter beds available in the Asheville-Buncombe County Continuum of Care for single individuals, only 105 can be accessed by non-veteran single adults compared to the 232 individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

There are three main shelter providers in Asheville, Alford said: ABCCM, the Salvation Army and Western Carolina Rescue Ministries. There is no year-round high-access shelter option.

Myth: People choose to be homeless

Often coinciding with the above assertion is the idea that people choose to be homeless. There's no easy answer, Alford said, but when this claim is brought to her, she asks people to “reframe the question.”

There's often something keeping them from services, she said, be it program commitments, stringent limitations or prior bad experiences.

She says people should ask, instead: “If this person isn't engaging in services, then what can we do to engage them?”

Its not as simple to exit homelessness as one might think, she said. The cost of living is high, affordable housing is minimal, and since the start of the pandemic, rents in Asheville have risen 41.7%.

Data from the North Carolina Housing Coalition found that 30% of Buncombe County households are cost burdened. With a fair market rent of \$1,466 a month, an annual income of \$58,640 is needed to foot the bill.

“I don't think someone chooses to be degraded or looked over or not considered,” Laws said. “And if someone chooses it, from my experience, it's usually the result of a lot of trauma or

wanting to disassociate from society."

Myth: The city isn't doing anything to address homelessness

For people who feel no work is being done, Laws said he would encourage them to get informed and talk to providers, Asheville City Council members and Buncombe County commissioners about what is being done.

"If they looked at what programs and activities are being funded, and what the best practices are through the National Alliance to End Homelessness or North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness, they will see that these things are in fact happening around the city," Laws said.

"I would tell people to get up from where they're sitting at and get involved. I really do believe it has to be a community effort ... If you have time to complain, you have time to act."

Alford encouraged people to come to a learning series. Another round of the free, three-part, hourlong sessions will begin in December.

"I invite folks to get to know the organizations on the ground working with folks in a housing crisis," she said. Meet the staff. Meet the people using the services. "Some of that discomfort, not knowing what to do, is because (people) don't have enough information."

Chambers said he feels the city is on a "good path:" not just talking about things, but putting them into action.

"I hope it continues," he said. "I hope the community can put the myths aside and decide for themselves, with real investment and firsthand experience, how they can help."

More: What's being done to address homelessness in Asheville? Events will highlight response

More: Food security in Asheville, Buncombe County threatened by 'socioeconomic perfect storm'

Get involved

Gregg Colburn, author of "Homelessness is a Housing Problem," will speak as part of the **Building Our City Speaker Series** on Nov. 30, 6-7 p.m., at the Asheville Masonic Temple. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Register at AshevilleDowntown.org. The series is

presented by the Grove Arcade Public Market Foundation and is focused on issues of affordable housing and access to equity.

Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee: Meets in the first floor conference room of Asheville City Hall the second Thursday of each month. 9-10:30 a.m. It will not meet in December.

Buncombe-Asheville Homeless Coalition: Meets virtually the second Tuesday of each month. 1-2 p.m. To join the mailing list, email bcnc.homeless.coalition@gmail.com.

National Alliance to End Homelessness joint work session: Asheville City Council and Buncombe County Commission will meet Dec. 4, from 9 a.m. -12 p.m. to follow up on the January report from the Alliance, with a focus on HIAC's work implementing recommendations, updates on key projects and next steps. It will be held in the Harrah's Cherokee Center banquet hall, 87 Haywood Street.

Homelessness Learning Series: All December sessions will be held at Stephens-Lee Community Center from 10-11 a.m. Session 1: Dec. 4, understanding homelessness — Causes and local landscape. Session 2: Dec. 11, understanding solutions to homelessness — community response, present and future. Session 3: Dec. 18, personal response to homelessness — How to partner with local agencies and take action.

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