

OUR VIEW

'All-in effort' required for homelessness in Duluth

City-sanctioned homeless camping only part of strategy

With every domed tent that pokes out from the wooded hillside above Bayfront Festival Park, with every fire that coughs dark smoke from beneath Interstate 35, and with every discarded needle littering a downtown parking ramp, Duluth's problem with homelessness becomes more apparent, more real, and more dire.

It's a growing crisis, and the evidence isn't only anecdotal. Last winter's annual one-night homeless count showed a 20% jump, to 284 people in Duluth with nowhere to stay. There likely are hundreds more out there: Consider that 554 different individuals used Duluth's warming center last winter, ducking in to escape the dangerous cold because they had no place else to go.

Additionally, "Our shelters are beyond capacity," Joel Kilgour of Loaves and Fishes of Duluth said in an interview this week with members of the News Tribune Editorial Board.

All of which is why, last year, Loaves and Fishes and the seven other charities and other organizations in Duluth that work to help those who are unhoused got together. They started meeting. Usually competitors for grants and funding for their own projects, this time, with this situation growing evermore grim, they decided to band together.

They've rallied around a singular, ambitious goal: "to get people off the streets and into permanent housing," as Kilgour stated.

And while the plan they've come up with to make that happen may be even more ambitious — not to mention pricey — it's the best strategy Duluth has right now. If anyone has a better one, please step forward.

Their plan — dubbed "Stepping On Up" — won't completely end homelessness, of course. That's likely impossible. But it can begin to effectively address it, to deal with it as a community, and to manage it so that our friends and neighbors who need help receive help. Not just with a splash of cash, but on an ongoing basis, so the root causes of homelessness in Duluth can then also begin to be addressed, so those alarming numbers can start to be reversed and come down, and so the encampments and needles and other indicators of the problem can be lessened.

The plan's success will depend on widespread community support and involvement. Backers have no illusions about how challenging it will be to win that public support.

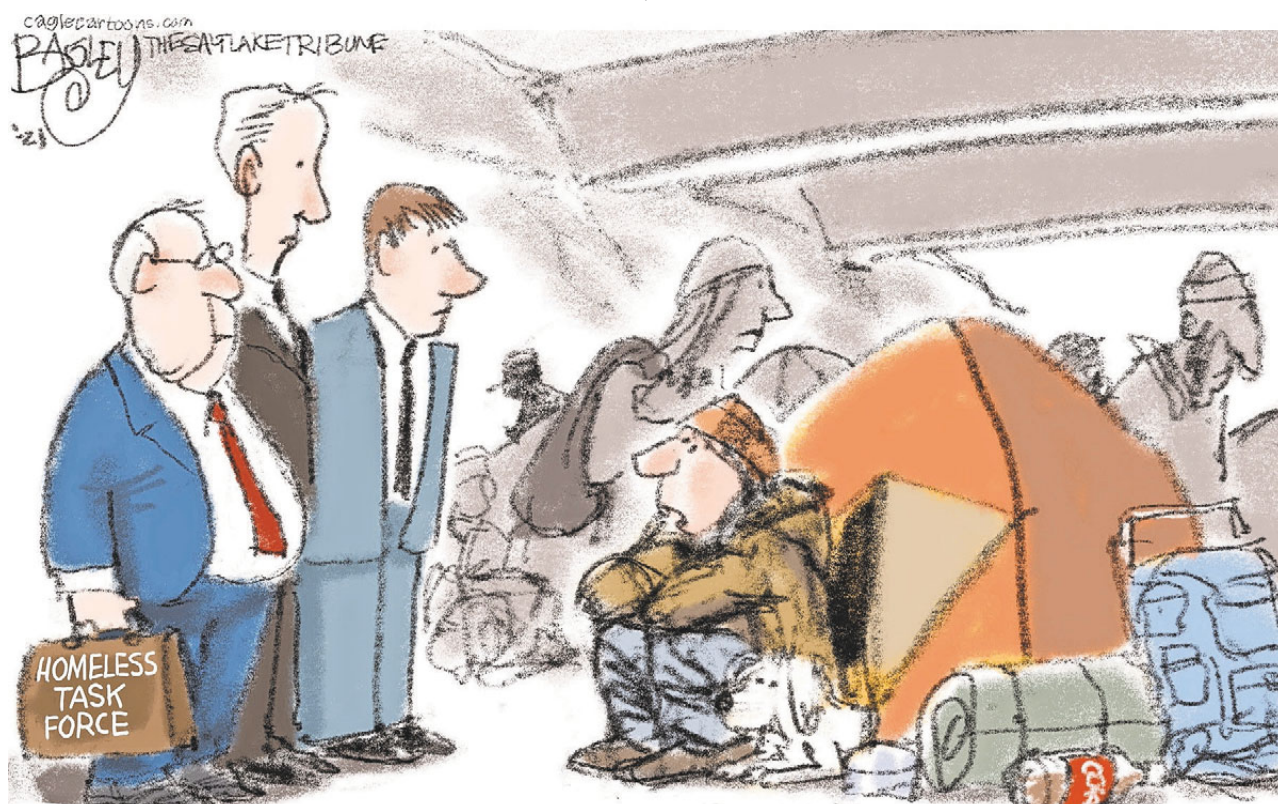
"We're talking about something truly transformative," Kilgour said. "This is going to require an all-in effort. ... What we are proposing isn't something that we can tackle by ourselves. All of our agencies are really stretched. Our resources are limited. Our staffing is limited. ... I hope that people who are nervous about this ... (are) willing



Isaac Broker, then 20 and just back from fighting in Afghanistan, searched for an item in his tent in the "Graffiti Graveyard" beneath Interstate 35 in downtown Duluth. He was living in the camp with others who were unhoused.

2013 News Tribune file photo

CARTOONIST'S VIEW



"I'D LOVE TO HEAR ABOUT 'THE DIGNITY OF WORK'—JUST AS SOON AS I GET BACK FROM MY \$7.25-AN-HOUR JOBS." Pat Bagley/Cagle Cartoons

WHO'S BEHIND THIS

The organizations participating in Stepping On Up are:

- ▶ American Indian Community Housing Organization
- ▶ CHUM
- ▶ Human Development Center
- ▶ Life House Duluth
- ▶ Loaves and Fishes of Duluth
- ▶ Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota
- ▶ Safe Haven Shelter and Resource Center
- ▶ The Salvation Army

a year in the past quarter century alone. According to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, communities invest \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year in emergency services for every resident who's unsheltered.

"We're already spending money on the back end trying to fix the problem. If we're able to spend it on the front end instead," Kilgour said, "that's a much more humane alternative and probably more cost-effective."

"The cost to the city, the cost to the public as a whole, is astronomical," including for police calls and to move and clean up encampments, Davey said. "The funding going to support the current system is ridiculous. The camps are going to happen. They're going to be there. So what are we going to do to alleviate homelessness, alleviate the problems that are happening in the neighborhoods and business community, and to make spaces where everybody can be safe? Everybody has a right to be safe."

No one is a fan of tents dotting our scenic hillside, fires from encampments under the freeway, or needles or feces found in parking ramps and other public spaces. There is a plan now to start addressing it, and we certainly can debate its details and the spending decisions as we go along. But we also can keep in mind that for the strategy to work, for it to be effective for the betterment of our entire city, it needs support — from all of Duluth.

GET INVOLVED

The Stepping On Up initiative is hosting a community-education series this fall on understanding and responding to housing insecurity and homelessness. The sessions are free with snacks provided and masks encouraged. Pre-registration is also encouraged at tfaforms.com/5004629. For more information, visit steppingonupduluth.org.

- Doors open at 5 p.m. for each session, with training from 5:30-7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 8** — "Trauma Informed Approach," Lakeside Presbyterian Church, 4430 McCulloch St.
- Sept. 22** — "Mental Health Crisis Response," Lakeside Presbyterian Church
- Oct. 6** — "Youth Homelessness," First Covenant Church, 2101 W. Second St.
- Oct. 20** — "Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence," First Covenant Church
- Nov. 3** — "Substance Use Recovery and Harm Reduction," Twelve Holy Apostles Church, 632 E. Second St.
- Nov. 17** — "Understanding and De-Escalating Conflict," Twelve Holy Apostles Church

to embrace it as a real opportunity as a community to make a difference in people's lives and to transform the way we're operating as a society so we can get to a place where everyone has a place to call home and feels like they belong."

As the News Tribune reported in July, Stepping On Up is a five-year, \$33 million, three-phase initiative.

The first phase — meant to be short-term and stop-gap — includes a safe place for people living out of their vehicles to park, with hygiene facilities, trash receptacles, and support services. Staff

needs to be found before the space can open, hopefully still this year, organizers said. Also as part of this phase, as many as four sanctioned sites for tent encampments are to be established in the city, probably by next summer, with 10-15 tents per site. On Monday, the Duluth City Council voted to authorize these "outdoor living zones" by legalizing them in city code.

"It's not a perfect situation. It's not what we all want for our friends and neighbors and loved ones who are experiencing homelessness. But it's a

heck of a lot better than what we have happening right now, which is unregulated camping all over town," Kilgour said. "It provides people with some measure of stability so they can start working toward eventual permanent housing and so they can address their disabilities."

The second phase would increase shelter capacity by 100 units in a village of four buildings with 25 buildings with 25 units each. Duluth's current 155 shelter beds clearly aren't enough. Minneapolis provides a model for this phase, which is hoped to be established by 2023. With services and other help available there, this "village" would replace the authorized outdoor tent encampments.

The initiative's third phase involves establishing 200 units of permanent, low-cost, community-based housing. Tiny homes, dorm-style apartments, and the conversions of hotels or motels all could be part of this phase.

"It's going to take all of these partnerships working together to be able to make this (initiative) a reality and

to be able to allow it to be the success that we think it needs to be," CHUM CEO John Cole said to the editorial board.

Think of the initiative more as an ongoing community strategy than an end-all fix.

"This isn't something like, 'Oh, we're going to pop these plans out, we're going to put up these camps,' and then bam, everything is going to be resolved and done," said Jen Davey of the American Indian Community Housing Organization, or AICHO, in Duluth. "This is the start of a long-term solution to a long-term chronic problem."

"The current situation really is untenable," said Kilgour. "We cannot immediately build our way out of this problem."

Especially with no idea yet where the estimated \$33 million needed will come from. As costs and investments are considered, those behind Stepping On Up ask that Duluthians keep in mind how much homelessness is costing us now. Few realize, they said, that federal funding for homelessness has declined in Duluth by an estimated, inflation-adjusted \$3 million