THE HEART OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a difficult and complex issue facing virtually every community in the United States. Recently, social service professionals and community volunteers in Woodstock met to offer insights and suggestions for Mayor Brian Sager’s community communication on the issue. The resulting paper, titled The Heart of Homelessness, is presented in four chapters, each intended to address a set of commonly asked questions. Specifically, the chapters cover the ‘why’s’ behind the perceived increase in homelessness; the rights of people who are homeless and the limitations on what many believe should be basic enforcement practices; the rationale behind the Old Firehouse Assistance Center; and, the actions now underway to develop a permanent fixed site facility to address the longstanding need.

The intent of the paper is not to defend actions or persuade people to a particular position, but to provide basic factual information in response to provocative questions so people can construct their own knowledge and understanding.

For those interested in additional information or wishing to contribute, through donations of money, materials or volunteer time, we encourage you to directly contact the following agencies:

Old Firehouse Assistance Center
(McHenry County Housing Authority)
(815) 338-7752 ext. 137
Sue Rose: srove@mchenrycountyhousing.org

Home of the Sparrow
(815) 271-5444
https://www.hosparrow.org/

Turning Point
(815) 338-8081
http://www.turnpt.org/

Pioneer Center for Human Services
(815) 759-7144
https://www.pioneercenter.org/support/make-a-donation-today/

McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness
(815) 334-4089
The Heart of Homelessness

...Why are there so many homeless in Woodstock today?

You may think: “Homelessness in the United States is a matter of choice; after all, we are an affluent society and those who are homeless have either made poor life choices or simply decided to abrogate responsibility for themselves, placing the burden on society”.

Here are the facts: Homelessness has been a part of communities for as long as societies have existed. The root causes and social responses, however, have changed over time. Today, homelessness is on the rise in the United States and has become a major issue facing larger metropolitan areas, suburban communities and even small rural communities, particularly if those communities serve as the seat of county government. Further, people experience homelessness in different ways:

- **Crisis homelessness** is a one-time experience that lasts for a year or less.
- **Episodic homelessness** is a pattern in which people are homeless for multiple, short periods.
- **Chronic homelessness** is an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more OR an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

**Why is homelessness on the rise?**

There are many reasons for the increase in the number of people who are homeless. The Northeastern Illinois Regional Roundtable on Homelessness commissioned the University of Illinois at Chicago to conduct the region’s most comprehensive study ever conducted on homelessness in Chicago and its suburbs. The landmark study confirmed there are often multiple and complex reasons people become homeless. However, homelessness results from three basic root causes or combinations thereof:

- **Economic hardship**: The inability to pay rent is by far the most common cause of homelessness. Losing a job (49%) and being cut off from or receiving inadequate public assistance (40.6%) are major contributing factors.
- **Health issues**: Health problems are significant causes of homelessness, including substance abuse (46.3%) and physical (18.6%) or mental health problems (13.5%).
- **Leaving precarious situations**: Leaving an unstable situation, such as a “doubled-up” living arrangement (42%) or an institutional setting (47%), including a hospital, mental health facility, or prison, often leads to homelessness.

The McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness annually conducts a *Point in Time Survey* which identifies McHenry County homelessness resulting from these primary factors:

- Substance use (drug and alcohol addiction) 11.2%
- Mental illness 19.0%
- Veterans 12.5%
- Domestic violence 22.8%
- Chronic health condition 3.2%
- Disability 7.7%
- Other, including economic hardship 23.6%
The high cost of housing creates an economic hardship contributing to the homeless condition. In McHenry County, the median rent for any size of household unit is $1,048 per month. Although not that different from other suburban Chicagoland counties, it is higher than the $983 median monthly rent of Cook County and the $905 median monthly rent for the State of Illinois.

When juxtaposed with household incomes, the concern associated with the cost of housing becomes evident. In McHenry County, an individual earning a minimum wage of $8.25 per hour and working 40 hours per week would need to spend $6.55 per hour worked or 79% of their wages to afford the median rental unit. A level of 30% or higher is considered a rent burden.

McHenry County reports that 2.0% of the population or 6,169 live in extreme poverty in which extreme poverty is defined as receiving an annual income below fifty percent of the federal poverty threshold. Further, 21.1% or 4,855 households in McHenry County experience extreme rent burden; that is, households in which fifty percent or more of income is spent on housing costs.

**But why are we seeing so many homeless people in Woodstock?**

The total number of people who are homeless in Woodstock has remained relatively constant for the past few years. There are several reasons we have a homeless population in the community and why we seem to see more this year than previous years:

- **Woodstock is the McHenry County Seat and the location of the county court system, as well as many social service agencies.**
- **For the past few years, a number of the individuals in Woodstock’s homeless population have lived in four to five campsites located largely out-of-sight on both public and private property. This year, due to concerns regarding garbage and property damage, private property owners requested the City of Woodstock remove those campsites. As a result, the population was displaced to other more visible areas of the community.**
- **Drug and alcohol addiction is on the rise.**
- **The State of Illinois closed State Mental Health Facilities and the population was forced back into communities and, too often, onto the streets.**
- **Many family households feel unable to provide for or cope with the magnitude of issues surrounding family members experiencing addiction, mental illness, or physical and psychological trauma and force those afflicted out of the household as a defensive or protective measure.**
- **Domestic violence is on the rise and victims often retreat to homelessness in order to avoid violence and abuse in the home.**
- **More Veterans are returning from active duty and find themselves unable to secure employment or in particularly challenging mental and physical health circumstances.**
- **Although approximately 36% of Woodstock’s housing stock is composed of rental units and the average monthly rent is $939, nearly 49% of individuals and families renting in the City are rent burdened; that is, they pay more than 30% of their gross income towards rent. Sudden reductions in income due to job loss or illness have a devastating effect on housing affordability. Similar circumstances exist in communities throughout McHenry County.**
• People who are homeless find the Park in the Square and downtown area an attractive location to spend time, just as other residents and visitors.
• Woodstock is on the METRA Line and the train station is located in the heart of the City. Ease of access contributes to greater residential and visitor presence, as well as the presence of people who are homeless.
• Woodstock is a very inclusive, compassionate and giving community. When we see areas of need, we work to address those needs. As a result, many individuals, businesses, organizations and churches consistently reach out to provide food, clothing, bicycles, personal care items and more to help homeless individuals. While having a reputation for being a caring community is a source of pride, it also encourages a homeless presence and, in some instances, enables irresponsible behavior.
• The opening of the Old Firehouse Assistance Center on South Street provides a location for displaced individuals to gather with the assurance of a meal, shower, social services, medical treatment, mental health evaluation, referrals, other services, and a respite from extreme outdoor temperatures. The center is open five days a week, Monday through Friday 9:00 am-3:00 pm. It does not provide overnight accommodation and those who are served must be able to prove they have been a resident of McHenry County for 90 days or more. The service center is a gathering place on South Street and, as a result, the homeless population in the City has become more visible.

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...What rights and responsibilities do the homeless have, what limitations are placed on the City of Woodstock, and what has the City done so far to address the issue?

You may think: “People who are homeless do not pay property taxes like the rest of us and yet taxpayers are paying for efforts to provide assistance and manage inappropriate behavior like drinking, panhandling, fighting, lewd behavior, and saying or yelling inappropriate things to people who are walking or driving by. They are generally creating a public disturbance. They can’t just gather and sit or stand around our City streets and parks, creating an uninviting or threatening environment after we have invested so much into making our City an attractive community. That’s loitering and it’s all illegal.”

Here are the facts: Homelessness is not illegal. In fact, the State of Illinois adopted a Homeless Bill of Rights on August 22nd, 2013 which states, “No person’s rights, privileges, or access to public services may be denied or abridged solely because he or she is homeless. Such a person shall be granted the same rights and privileges as any other citizen of this State.” Here are some of the rights of the homeless that are protected by the Homeless Bill of Rights:

- **The right to use and move freely in public spaces**, including but not limited to public sidewalks, public parks, public transportation, and public buildings, in the same manner as any other person and without discrimination on the basis of his or her housing status.
- **The right to equal treatment** by all state and municipal agencies, without discrimination on the basis of housing status.
- **The right to a reasonable expectation of privacy** in his or her personal property to the same extent as personal property in a permanent residence.
- **The right to emergency medical care** free from discrimination based on his or her housing status.

Homeless people are also entitled to the same privileges and protections enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. As citizens, they still are protected by such constitutional guarantees as the right to due process, First Amendment freedoms, freedom to travel and freedom from cruel and unusual punishment. Their civil rights must be a consideration in any efforts the community takes to address the challenges associated with the homeless.

**Why can’t we keep homeless people out of our City or move them on?**

This question is not new. It has been posed and evaluated by units of local government multiple times over the years and, as a result, has been the subject of various court cases. In the end, many court decisions shape our understanding of the rights of people who are homeless, as well as define what local units of government can and cannot do when addressing issues surrounding the homeless population. For example, regardless of what we may hear, units of government do not have the authority to force people who are homeless to move out of a community, to force them to take a bus or train and leave the area, or to stand at entry ways to a community such as train stations and refuse them entry. Here are a few examples of cases limiting the regulation of loitering, freedom of movement and panhandling:
• People have a right to “be” or “exist” and loitering laws do not supersede that right; City of Chicago v. Morales, 527 U.S. 41 (1999)...“the freedom to loiter for innocent purposes is part of the “liberty” protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. We have expressly identified this ‘right to remove from one place to another according to inclination’ as ‘an attribute of personal liberty’ protected by the Constitution....”

• You cannot punish people for existing in a community by forcing them to leave; Pottinger v. City of Miami, 810 F. Supp. 1551, 1563 (S.D. Fla. 1992)... “As long as the homeless...do not have a single place where they can lawfully be, the ordinances...effectively punish them for something for which they may not be convicted under the eighth amendment--sleeping, eating and other innocent conduct. Accordingly, the court finds that defendant's conduct violates the eighth amendment ban against cruel and unusual punishment.”

• People have a right to ask for money; Norton v. City of Springfield, 768 F.3d 713 (7th Cir. 2014) and Norton v. City of Springfield 806 F.3d 411 (7th Cir. 2015)...Rejecting Springfield’s anti-panhandling ordinance; finding that a prohibition on panhandling was a content based regulation of free speech.

**So what can we do?**

The bottom line is that everyone in the United States and the State of Illinois has certain rights, regardless of housing status. Everyone also has a civic responsibility to conduct themselves appropriately and in accordance with the law, regardless of age, gender, marital status, disability, housing status or any other designating factor. The challenging question of the ages, however, has been, ‘appropriate in whose eyes?’ and that question has been the subject of many discrimination cases. Just because individuals do not dress, appear or live how and where we think they should does not mean their behavior is inappropriate in a manner that can be controlled through government action.

It is a matter of finding the balance between protecting peoples’ rights while simultaneously holding people accountable for inappropriate behavior and illegal activity. First, it is important to acknowledge that not all people who are homeless conduct themselves inappropriately or engage in illegal activity. As in most social situations, a handful of people are responsible for 90% or more of the inappropriate or illegal activity which must be addressed by law enforcement. The vast majority of people who are homeless are law abiding individuals who act responsibly. Again, it is not illegal to be homeless.

It is also important to understand the distinction between inappropriate behavior and illegal activity. While the following behaviors may be considered inappropriate and undesirable by most, they are not illegal:

• Catcalling, profanity and yelling derogatory language or slurs at passersby; this is certainly disturbing, and in some instances frightening, but it is largely protected under Freedom of Speech, unless or until it crosses the line into threatening speech or behavior. It is also important to note that such activity occurs from both sides. While we are disturbed by individuals of the homeless population who yell inappropriate comments at passing cars,
we also experience occupants of passing cars yelling unprovoked comments at people who are homeless. It is inappropriate at all levels, but not illegal unless it crosses the line into assault or battery.

- **Public drunkenness**: while the consumption of alcohol in the public way is prohibited by local ordinance, it is not illegal to be inebriated in the public way. Exceptions center around activity associated with inebriation such as driving while intoxicated, blocking the public way by being passed out across a sidewalk or in the street, creating a public disturbance such as fighting or making excessive noise.

- **Passive panhandling**: standing at a street corner with a sign asking for assistance, placing a hat on the sidewalk as an invitation for a financial contribution, or engaging in a street performance with a sign that donations are being sought, are not illegal activities and recent case law has indicated this is very difficult behavior to regulate.

- **Placing possessions on or around public benches and facilities**: while perhaps unsightly, it is not illegal to place bags, coats, and personal property on public benches or facilities, unless the placement of such property blocks the public way.

Despite the above limitations on regulation, the City can and does prohibit certain behaviors in public spaces, including:

- **Drinking in the public way**: local ordinances prohibit the consumption of alcohol upon or about any street, sidewalk, public thoroughfare or other public property (the public way) within the City limits as well as within parks, unless otherwise authorized by the City Council. Further, it is unlawful for any person to possess any alcoholic liquor not sealed in its original container in the public way, unless otherwise authorized.

- **Public urination and defecation**: local ordinances prohibit a person from urinating or defecating on the public way, or on any outdoor public property, or on any outdoor private property. The provision does not apply to appropriately authorized, maintained and enclosed portable toilet facilities.

- **Littering**: it is unlawful for any person to deposit garbage or other similar refuse in any street, alley or public way or upon any private property, unless such garbage or other similar refuse is placed in proper receptacles.

- **Blocking the public way**: it is unlawful for a person to create or maintain any obstruction of any street, alley, sidewalk or other public way, except as specifically authorized. Further, it is unlawful to erect or maintain any building or structure which encroaches upon any street, alley, sidewalk or public place.

- **Aggressive panhandling**: while a recent Supreme Court decision has made it more difficult to specifically regulate panhandling...or any specific speech based on its content...the law still does not permit any type of behavior that crosses the line from protected speech (such as passive panhandling) to speech that is accompanied by behavior that is more akin to assault or battery. Thus, prohibitions should still stand on what is often referred to as Aggressive Panhandling which includes speech that is accompanied by the touching of the solicited person without that person’s consent or other types of threatening behavior; intentionally blocking the entrance to any vehicle or building; dangerously stepping into the main traveled portion of a city street or highway with the intention of soliciting a
donation from the driver of or passenger in an automobile without first obtaining a permit for such activity; making any statement, gesture or other communication that would cause a reasonable person to feel threatened, fearful or compelled; or cleaning the windows on a motor vehicle in traffic on a public street or on private property without permission from the owner or occupant of the vehicle. Additionally, disturbing the peace in the course of panhandling is also considered aggressive and unlawful.

However, in order to be fined or arrested for these illegal activities, Police Officers must have probable cause and charges must be made. That means:

- A Police Officer must witness the illegal activity and file charges on behalf of the City;
- A witness to or victim of the illegal activity must be willing to press charges and evidence they were a witness to or victim of the illegal activity; or
- A Police Report must have been filed following an incident of illegal activity and subsequent investigation provides the required evidence to forward charges.

The City’s Police Department does not have the right to fine or arrest an individual for illegal activity based upon hearsay or because someone thinks an individual should be arrested or believes the behavior should be illegal when it is not.

Understanding the City has the responsibility through its professional Police Department to comply with all federal, state and local laws and standards, the City of Woodstock has worked with legal counsel and the McHenry County State Attorney’s Office to identify and carefully craft defensible ordinances that find the balance between protecting peoples’ rights and simultaneously holding people accountable for inappropriate behavior and illegal activity. Accordingly, the City has amended the Woodstock City Code by adding or amending the following ordinances:

- Title 6, Chapter 2, Section 6.2.6 Regulating Extended Use of Parks and City Owned Facilities;
- Title 4, Chapter 9, Section 4.9.10 Prohibiting Outdoor Urination and Defecation;
- Title 6, Chapter 2, Section 6.2.6 Regulating Smoking and Drinking in Parks and City Owned Facilities; and
- Title 6, Chapter 2, Section 6.2.C. Creating New Rules Regarding Use of and Prohibited Activities at the Train Depot.

The City Code is available for reference by going to the City’s website at www.woodstockil.gov, opening the ‘Your Government’ tab at the top of the banner and then scrolling down and clicking on the ‘City Code.’

###
The Heart of Homelessness

CHAPTER 3

...What does the Old Firehouse Assistance Center provide and why is it located just off the Woodstock Square?

You may think: “I don’t really have anything against helping the homeless, but I don’t think the City should have opened an assistance center in the Old Firehouse on South Street. It’s too close to the Square, is on a major entrance way to the downtown, is in a residential area, and too close to churches and schools. Not only are we attracting homeless from other communities, but we’ve provided them a place to hang out. Every day we see a bunch of homeless hanging around outside the Old Firehouse Assistance Center in the middle of our downtown drinking, sleeping and harassing passersby. I don’t like to drive by, let alone walk by, and visitors to the City are thinking, ‘what a dump Woodstock is’. It was a dumb idea to put an assistance center there.”

Here are the facts: In 2014 and 2015, long before the Old Firehouse Assistance Center existed, businesses and residents began to express concerns over the presence and activities of homeless individuals in the Park in the Square. At about the same time, there was discussion among social service providers throughout McHenry County about the need for a fixed site that would offer transitional housing and support services to the larger McHenry County homeless population to expand or supplement the efforts of Pioneer Center. Unfortunately, those efforts languished primarily because of high cost estimates and concerns over sustainable financing, the question of which entity would serve as lead agency, and of paramount concern, where such a facility would be located.

Concerns about the homeless on the Square continued and there was a call for the City to do something. In the absence of action on a larger county-wide solution and to address the growing call for action and resolution in the City, an invitation was extended to service providers and interested individuals to attend a Roundtable for Homeless Service Providers at Stage Left Café on October 23rd, 2015. Nearly 35 people attended the meeting and the challenges addressed were:

- How do we provide assistance for people who are homeless in the coming winter months?
- How can we better manage inappropriate behaviors exhibited by some homeless people on the Square?
- How can we better coordinate resources as we look to providing for immediate needs, including food, shelter and clothing, of people who are homeless in our community?

In response to these questions, the group agreed to focus on the following short-term priority objectives:

- Create a responsive resource guide for use by all agencies, the Police Department and City.
- Work with Pioneer/PADS to extend weekday, daytime warming center services over weekends.
- Work with the McHenry County Housing Authority and local churches to develop plans for using the Old Fire Station on South Street as an intake and warming center.

Why was the Old Firehouse chosen as the site for a homeless assistance center?

There is rarely an ideal location for a homeless assistance center. Through consultation with service providers, it was determined a center would require accessible space large enough to
provide a check-in station, offices for confidential intake processing, a common warming/cooling room, restroom and shower facilities, lockers for short-term personal item storage, a kitchen, a washer and dryer, and storage areas. Upon consideration of these interests, and given the facts that 1) the City of Woodstock owns the Old Firehouse facility which was used on a very limited basis, or not at all, and 2) by virtue of being a firehouse, the facility could immediately offer many of the necessary accommodations with little additional investment, it was determined to consider the site as a site of opportunity.

There were other considerations:

- The City of Woodstock has certain statutorily assigned duties it is required to fulfill with its limited taxpayer dollars. The provision of social services is outside the scope of those duties as such programs are considered to be the jurisdiction and responsibility of other units of government. In this instance, that means the City should not expend limited municipal funds for improvements to a facility that may be seen solely as accommodations to a homeless assistance center. However, improvements that could support a future City use of a facility such as a senior or youth center, and also the short-term or interim use for homeless center functions, would be appropriate. Further, the cost of improvements exclusively associated with a homeless assistance center could be covered through grant funding with the added benefit of improving a municipal facility.
- Under the same considered limitations, the City should not use municipal funds to hire personnel or expend time to secure and assign volunteers to manage a center.
- It is desirable to have a centrally located facility in the county seat where court services and social agency services are provided. At the same time, it was of concern that a centrally located facility, such as the Old Firehouse, would be in the heart of the downtown and near the Square, the very area of expressed concern by residents and businesses.

Given all of these considerations, it was determined the best opportunity for immediate action was to utilize the Old Firehouse, under the auspices of the McHenry County Housing Authority.

In January 2016, the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) opened for one day a week. In May it opened for two days per week and then in November, 2016 expanded services to three days per week with a designated on-site manager. At the end of October, 2017 the center began offering services five days per week, Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm.

OFAC is an entity of the McHenry County Housing Authority (MCHA) which provides the staff, manages the site, and coordinates the volunteers and service providers who come to the site. The City of Woodstock owns the building and provides MCHA use of the building free of charge.

Specifically, the center provides services to people who are homeless and who have continually resided in McHenry County for a minimum of the past 90 days. Those who are not homeless and do not meet the residency requirement are not allowed to use the OFAC. Certain exceptions may be made for Veterans, individuals recently hospitalized, and victims of domestic violence or natural disasters.
OFAC services for people who are homeless begin with a background check and comprehensive intake process to determine individual needs. Specific offered services include:

- Hot showers
- Snacks and meals
- Haircuts
- Medical care
- Housing opportunity information
- Social service assistance referrals and support
- Immediate help for cases of critical need
- Other individualized assistance as needed

By the end of 2017, the center had served 425 different individuals since opening in January, 2016 and placed 43 individuals into permanent housing. All individuals go through an initial intake process which includes a background check and identifies specific areas of need. Many have been referred to social service resources for employment, addiction counseling, medical assistance and other individual needs.

Additional information regarding the Old Firehouse Assistance Center, services provided, and ways to volunteer or provide assistance is available by emailing srose@mchenrycountyhousing.org or mbennett@mchenrycountyhousing.org or calling 815-337-9809.

Why can’t we suspend services at the site until a permanent, fixed site is established?
Immediately closing or suspending the efforts of the OFAC is certainly possible, but to what end? It is important to consider the following:

- The need is not going to go away or lessen. In fact, under current state and national circumstances, the need is likely to increase.
- People who are homeless, as all people, need to be someplace.

If the Old Firehouse Assistance Center were to close tomorrow, it would only serve to displace the homeless population yet again. In all likelihood, homeless individuals would return to frequenting the Park in the Square, Emricson Park, Woodstock Public Library and retail centers in the community. Under such circumstances, the opportunity to provide services, as well as oversee and manage the inappropriate behaviors of the few, would be more challenging.

Would the homeless issue appear less critical? Probably, because the individuals would be dispersed throughout the community, as they were when campsites on private and public property existed. It is the out of sight, out of mind phenomenon. The number of homeless people and their associated needs will not diminish, however. Woodstock will continue to be the county seat and the homeless population will continue to be in the community because the court system and social service agencies will continue to be located here.
While suspending the services of the OFAC might solve the problem in the eyes of some by displacing the population away from a very visible location on South Street, the ultimate solution would be a permanent, fixed site center providing emergency shelter and needed social services on a county-wide basis. Until such a center is located and functional, the Old Firehouse Assistance Center, under the management of the McHenry County Housing Authority with the assistance of numerous volunteers and support groups and agencies, continues to be a productive and successful effort.

**What can we do to improve the situation in the meantime?**

There continues to be a concern about the inappropriate behavior of a few homeless people who gather in and around the OFAC and the downtown area. And, it must be recognized the public drinking, panhandling, fighting, lewd behavior, and saying or yelling inappropriate things…in general, the public disturbance created by these few…appeared excessive in 2017. Such inappropriate behaviors cannot be tolerated.

In an effort to better manage inappropriate behaviors on behalf of the few, the City has worked with the State Attorney’s Staff and municipal lawyers to amend the Woodstock City Code by adding or amending ordinances in order to justifiably and defensibly hold individuals accountable for irresponsible and/or illegal behavior. As a result, the Police Department will be able to more proactively and aggressively work to curb such behaviors. Further, the City is working with the McHenry County Housing Authority to address protocols and methods that will reduce inappropriate behaviors in and around the OFAC.

It must also be recognized that two community churches serve as PADS sites providing overnight accommodations during the season. The City, Pioneer Center, Housing Authority and PADS site managers will collectively work to manage inappropriate behaviors at those sites, as well.

Residents who observe inappropriate and/or illegal behavior on behalf of any individuals within the community are encouraged to immediately contact the Woodstock Police Department by calling 911 in an emergency or 815-338-2131 to report non-emergency associated activities or situations.

###
The Heart of Homelessness

...What is being done to find a permanent resolution to the homeless issue in Woodstock and McHenry County?

You may think: “The City has done nothing to reduce the number of homeless people in Woodstock or control the behavior of those who are here. Not only do we have two PADS sites in Woodstock, but the City has created a larger problem by opening the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) in the middle of downtown. We might as well put up billboards along the METRA line and tollway that say ‘Wanted: All Homeless...Woodstock will not only welcome you with open arms, we’ll take care of you.’ It’s ridiculous. Why should Woodstock taxpayers have to provide for the homeless population from all over McHenry County, the suburbs and Chicago, let alone put up with all of the problems? It’s about time somebody comes up with a real solution for McHenry County.”

Here are the facts: City representatives have been in discussions with a number of entities regarding a broader, more comprehensive county-wide approach to the homeless situation since 2014. Those engaged in the conversations include:

- The McHenry County Housing Authority
- The McHenry County Mental Health Board
- Pioneer Center of McHenry County
- The McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness
- McHenry County PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) site volunteers
- The McHenry County Council of Governments
- The McHenry County Chiefs of Police Association
- Various municipalities and townships
- Various churches
- Other interested parties

The purpose of the discussions was to move toward a permanent, fixed site center that would provide transitional housing and needed social services. Major questions included:

- What would be the cost establishing and maintaining a fixed site?
- Which entity would serve as lead agency?
- Would volunteers associated with servicing active PADS sites be willing to provide similar volunteer support at a fixed site facility? and
- Where should a fixed site facility be located?

Costs: Those early discussions led to specific efforts to estimate facility and associated service costs. A pro forma financial statement was developed with an estimated $1 million property acquisition and $800,000 initial facility development cost, along with a $2 million annual operating budget for facility management and maintenance and the provision of associated social services.
**Lead Agency:** Given its history in McHenry County, its leadership of the county PADS program, and the mission of “Meeting people’s most basic needs of food, shelter and support through programs designed for youth, families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness.,” Pioneer Center was considered the appropriate lead agency for a fixed site facility.

**Volunteer Support:** The PADS program was initiated in McHenry County in 1988 when members of various churches throughout the county became concerned about the number of homeless individuals living in cars, wooded areas, in viaducts or under bridges. Church congregations were asked if they would be willing to serve as a host site one night per week for a PADS program from October 1 through April 30, 7:00 pm to 7:00 am, and provide individuals with dinner, a warm and secure place to sleep, and breakfast. Those congregations were overwhelmingly supportive and the McHenry County PADS program was launched.

Since that time, a number of area churches have served as PADS sites, routinely hosting 30 to 50 homeless individuals. Depending on the site, services often include showers and laundry facilities. Further, transportation is now provided from one community’s PADS site to the next day’s scheduled site in another community by Pioneer Center.

Church PADS sites rely solely upon volunteers who cook and serve meals, clean kitchen, restroom and shower facilities, and ensure blankets, sheets and mattresses are cleaned and laundered.

Recognizing the PADS program started within churches and there is an understandable sense of ownership and pride among congregations, there was initial concern that the volunteer base would be hesitant to give up their host site in favor of a fixed county site and would withdraw volunteer support. Upon conversation with volunteers, however, the majority of the volunteer base associated with current PADS sites expressed willingness to transfer their volunteer services to a fixed site facility.

**Location:** Local realtors were contacted to identify potential facilities in the county with adequate space and opportunity to accommodate up to 70 individuals and provide the essential elements of a check-in station, offices for confidential intake processing and administration, a common warming/cooling room, a single large dormitory sleeping room and 3-4 smaller family unit sleeping rooms, restroom and shower facilities, lockers for personal item storage, a kitchen, a washer and dryer, and storage areas. Sites were identified and one in particular was toured on three occasions to determine its viability. Ultimately, concerns over start-up costs and hesitancy of the property owner put further considerations on hold.

**General Conclusions:** The majority of volunteer groups associated with county PADS sites were willing to transition their efforts to a fixed site. However, administrative changes at Pioneer Center, high pro forma cost estimates, concerns over sustainable financing and an inability to locate an appropriate facility at a reasonable start-up cost were factors that discouraged action. As a result, dialogue regarding a fixed McHenry County site for the homeless faltered. It was at that time, in the face of growing demand from businesses and residents, conversations about a local effort in Woodstock began.
So what is happening now?
Currently, under the initiation and leadership of the City of Woodstock, in concert with several dedicated agencies, there is a vigorous and renewed effort to move toward a permanent, fixed site facility for the homeless in McHenry County. Specifically, four efforts are underway:

1. Many of the previously identified entities, along with others, met on November 15, 2017 and were advised that, while Woodstock and the McHenry County Housing Authority are grateful for the accomplishments of the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC), there are significant community concerns and challenges associated with its location. As a result, there is a strong and urgent need to identify and open a permanent, fixed site facility in the county.

   While the OFAC will continue to serve people who are homeless on an interim basis and until a fixed site facility is identified and operational, it is not and cannot be a permanent solution. Those gathered understood the need to work together to find a larger more permanent county-wide resolution. Primary service agencies are now meeting regularly with a commitment to identifying and opening such a facility.

2. A meeting was held on December 18, 2017 with the Chairman of the McHenry County Board and County Administrator to emphasize the need and urgency for a fixed site homeless facility in McHenry County with the goal of having a facility operational as soon as possible. Conversations will continue at the County Board and administrative levels.

3. Another meeting was held on December 18, 2017 with leaders of the McHenry County Housing Authority, McHenry County Mental Health Board, McHenry County Community Development Department, and McHenry County Community Foundation to discuss funding a fixed site facility. It was generally agreed it was feasible to finance such a facility. Conversations will continue with the goal of opening a facility as soon as possible.

4. A meeting was held on December 19, 2017 with the Chief Executive Officer of the Heartland Realtor Organization regarding the need to identify sites and facilities for a fixed site for transitional housing and associated services. The organization offered its assistance and a search is proceeding.

Over the past decade, the economic downturn has created one of the most challenging periods in modern history and the effects have been felt at every level of society. With slow but steady improvement in the economy, there is renewed opportunity and enthusiasm to pursue the financial resources necessary to produce a county facility. Those working to address homelessness in our community will not be dissuaded until a permanent, fixed site facility to assist people who are homeless becomes a reality in McHenry County.

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