

Jason T. Shaplen

A Rise in Local Homelessness

Your cover story by Bill Cummings (news story, Nov. 26, "Homelessness on the decline") is accurate – but also misleading, particularly when it comes to Stamford/Greenwich.

While the article correctly states that between 2015 and 2016 homelessness across Connecticut decreased 3.6 percent, it neglected a key — and alarming — statistic: homelessness in Stamford/Greenwich actually increased during the same period, including a 35-percent increase in street homelessness. Indeed, the story that needs to be told is that Stamford/Greenwich is going against the trend statewide – and nationally – when it comes to homelessness.

The reasons are well known. The Stamford-Norwalk metropolitan area is now the fifth most expensive housing jurisdiction in the nation. While most daily expenses here track a few percentage points above national norms, housing costs are an outlier — they are more than double the national average.

This has resulted in a different kind of homelessness: economic homelessness. While mental illness and substance abuse still play an outsized role, the rising cost of living coupled with wage stagnation are leading to a rise in homelessness. Compounding this harsh reality is that 80 months since the start of the Great Recession, Connecticut has recovered only 69 percent of the jobs it lost during the downturn, making it one of only 10 states in the nation that has not yet recovered to pre-recession levels. (The percentage of jobs recovered has actually dropped over the past 12 months.) In many cases, those jobs that have been recovered pay less than those they replaced.

The disparity between declining monthly salaries and soaring monthly rents has led to a record demand for Inspirica's services. Our myriad shelters and transitional housing facilities are 100 percent full throughout the entire year. We are struggling to meet the demand. In the winter — when living on the streets is even more a matter of life and death — we operate the city's only Overnight Warming Center.

Inspirica is a unique organization; one we should be proud to have right here in Stamford/Greenwich. We are one of only a handful of organizations in the nation that is able to comprehensively address both the physical aspect of homelessness and the underlying reasons people become homeless on a single, powerful end-to-end platform.

In his article, Mr. Cummings notes that we are on the verge of ending chronic homelessness in Connecticut. This grand goal comes on the heels of ending veteran homelessness. These accomplishments have been years in the making and should be celebrated. But chronic and veteran homelessness comprise only a small percentage (13.6 percent) of homelessness in Stamford/Greenwich.

The real story is despite the fact that homelessness declined in Connecticut last year, it increased in Stamford/Greenwich, the wealthiest part and economic engine of the state. This sobering reality deserves our immediate attention and support.

Jason T. Shaplen is chief executive officer of Stamford-based Inspirica, Inc., which is the largest homeless shelter in Fairfield County.

To view the article online, please visit: <http://m.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/Homeless-parents-get-to-play-Santa-at-Stamford-10786847.php#photo-12020422>