

## **With homelessness rising, Stamford agency sees hard times ahead**

By Angela Carella

STAMFORD — By one count, dozens of homeless people spend their nights in the Stamford train station.

It's true of many Metro-North stops, so much so that the railroad contracts with a company that visits them to try to get people into better shelter.

The company, BRC, recently met with Inspirica, a Stamford agency that works to break the cycle of homelessness, and Metropolitan Transportation Authority police, said Aaron Donovan, deputy communications director for the MTA.

The meeting was held to figure out how best to address the homeless population in the railroad system, said Donovan, who called it a "long-term, vexing challenge." About 30 people may be sleeping at the Stamford station, Donovan said.

Inspirica CEO Jason Shaplen raised the problem during a Board of Finance meeting last week to discuss the \$233,000 Mayor David Martin has allocated his agency in the 2018-19 city budget.

Shaplen said the MTA told him people are not allowed to sleep at Grand Central station, a policy that soon will apply to Stamford. Grand Central is closed each day from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. and everyone except employees must leave, Donovan said.

Finance board member Dudley Williams asked Shaplen whether Inspirica, which provides shelter for 65 percent of Stamford's homeless population, could absorb the people who sleep at the Stamford station. Shaplen said not all of them would necessarily end up at Inspirica, where shelters are always full.

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"Some are single men who might go to Pacific House," Shaplen said. "We're at 105 percent capacity week in and week out - we can go over 100 percent by adding cribs and beds where we can."

Stamford has a significant homeless problem, Shaplen said.

"Last year almost 30 percent of the people who came to us had jobs when they came to us. Imagine that. They had jobs," he said. "It's not the working poor any more. It's the working homeless."

In Stamford, homelessness often is rooted in the high cost of living, Shaplen told the board.

"The Stamford area is the fifth-most expensive metro area in the nation. The cost of living has soared, but Connecticut is the only state that has not recovered the jobs lost during the (2008) recession," Shaplen said. "Connecticut has recovered only 82 percent of the jobs, and they don't pay as much as the ones that were lost. When you have a soaring cost of living and stagnant or declining wages, you get increased homelessness."

"We are barely keeping our arms around it," he said.

It's difficult for some to believe, he said, but homelessness in Stamford is on the rise, even while it is falling elsewhere. The number of homeless people in the state and the nation dropped in five of the last seven years, he said. Not so in Stamford.

"In four of the last seven years, Stamford saw an increase in homelessness," Shaplen said. "Even with the 18 percent decrease of last year, the most you can say about it — and this is sobering — is that it brought us back to the 2010 number, which was at the end of the recession, when unemployment was 10.1 percent."

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The money Martin proposed for Inspirica in the 2018-19 budget is \$8,000 more than the current fiscal year, when he allocated - and all the boards approved — \$225,000 for the agency.

That was a huge increase over the previous fiscal year, when Inspirica got only \$50,000.

Shaplen said he appreciates the support from the city, but he has lost \$570,000 a year in state funding for a couple of years. He asked for \$350,000 in the fiscal 2018-19 budget.

“We started this year projecting a \$126,000 deficit” in his \$6.7 million annual budget, Shaplen told the board. “But the deficit is up to \$253,000, and I’m not done yet looking at all of our operational expenses.”

Inspirica serves more than 1,000 people a year and places more people in housing now than ever. In the last 12 months the agency found permanent housing for 220 men, women and children, he said, and found jobs for 216 people who earn an average starting wage of \$12.87 an hour.

“The program is immensely successful but the need is still there,” Shaplen told the board. “I understand the pressure the mayor is under to make budgets work. I don’t envy the choices he has to make. We could not ask for a better partner than the city.”

But the \$233,000 the mayor plans to give the agency is only 3.3 percent of its budget. Inspirica raises 35 percent to 40 percent of its budget from private donations, he said, and changes to the tax code this year leave questions about whether that can be sustained.

“Stamford doesn’t have an agency to house homeless people like New York does,” Shaplen said.

“The city relies on us to do that. We house 350 people a night.

We’ve been massively underfunded for years.”

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