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A houseful of health

By Michelle Rich

Housing is not necessarily the topic that comes to mind when one thinks of community health, but location, quality, and affordability of housing all make a difference in health outcomes. In looking at the social factors that impact health (called *the social determinants of health*), housing makes a material difference. Not only do people spend more time in their houses than other places, but they also spend more money on housing than on any other expense. In Mendocino County, many people are concerned about housing and homelessness because of the increase in illegal camping and aggressive panhandling, as well as the changes to emergency shelter availability in the county.

At a basic level, housing problems are economic problems. Locally, the cost for housing is more than many people can afford. 61 percent of Mendocino County renters are unable to afford housing, according to the National Low Housing Coalition's analysis of average wages earned and HUD-estimated Fair Market Rent. Housing availability and cost impact homeowners and renters alike. About half of Mendocino County households own their own home. However, homeownership has declined about 6 percent since 2009. In 2012, about 60 percent of renters in the county spent more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Spending more than 30 percent of household income on housing makes it difficult to meet other basic needs such as food, electricity, and medical expenses.

Mendocino County residents have lower reported incomes than other communities. The average household income in 2012 was \$43,721 in Mendocino County, which is lower than both the State of California average (\$61,400) and the U.S. average (\$53,046). Interestingly, median household income in Mendocino County has stayed about the same since 2008. Though unemployment increased from 2009-2012, unemployment for 2013 and 2014-to-date is similar to pre-recession unemployment rates.

Though employment and people's ability to pay are certainly an issue, they are only part of the housing problem equation; affordability and supply are the other half of the housing problem. After all, one factor in high housing costs stems from the law of supply and demand. When there is more demand for housing than its present availability, the cost of housing typically increases. But it's not quite that clear cut in Mendocino County. In looking at the housing units available from 2000 to 2010, as measured by the U.S. Census, overall housing units increased, but so did vacancies. The population increased about 2 percent over this time period, while housing units increased by about 9 percent. Of the available housing stock in 2000, about 90 percent was occupied; in 2010, about 86 percent of available housing units were occupied. The decline was due to an increase in seasonal or recreational housing (which increased about 2 percent since 2000), but also to an increase in both homeowner and renter vacancies (which increased about 3 percent since 2000).

People experiencing homelessness in Mendocino County include individuals affected by layoffs, reduction in hours, and unemployment as well as those impacted by the foreclosures due to recession-related economic factors. Jacqueline Williams, Executive Director of the Ford Street Project and Buddy Eller Center, notes that the shelter has seen an increase in families seeking shelter due to precisely these kinds of economic considerations. But there is also a large population of individuals experiencing homelessness due to physical and mental health and/or substance abuse issues.

The myth is that all people experiencing homelessness took the same path to get there. The reality is that people are homeless for a wide array of reasons. In 2013, of the 1,344 homeless people in Mendocino County (according to the Point in Time Count), 230 were severely mentally ill, 261 had chronic substance abuse issues, 63 were veterans, and 59 were victims of domestic violence. There were 178 homeless people in households with children under 18 and 4.2 percent of public school students were homeless in 2013. There is also a prevalent belief that most of the homeless people come from out of the county and are attracted by the marijuana industry. However, many homeless people are from Mendocino County and experience homelessness for economic or other reasons.

While all people experiencing homelessness need shelter and stability, the path to get there looks different for each of these populations. An array of services and approaches is needed to solve the housing problem. This includes transitional housing models like those being rolled out this month at the Buddy Eller Center, which will have 22 beds for sober, able bodied individuals who are working towards employment. Families need secure, stable environments as quickly as possible, as children need to have a sense of home and security for optimal development. Combined shelter models which place potentially unstable adults in the same shelters with families are not the ideal situation for those children.

Ongoing housing support may be needed for people whose medical conditions, mental health, and chronic substance abuse create housing and employment barriers. As Libby Guthrie, Executive Director of Mendocino County AIDS/Viral Hepatitis Network, said, there is a “medically and mentally vulnerable population” who need assistance finding safe shelter, and they “aren’t just people who don’t want to do anything with their lives.” For this vulnerable population in particular, there are not enough single bedroom units that accept housing vouchers and other forms of assistance.

The most pressing issue for many people is where to go once winter begins. With the recent adoption of a stricter camping ordinance in Ukiah, the options for homeless individuals are decreasing. There are reports of a wide array of a combination of couch surfing, motel stays, co-living situations, and other creative solutions.

With the closure of the Buddy Eller emergency shelter in June 2014, many individuals and organizations have stepped up to try and find solutions for the immediate needs of people needing a place to sleep. The Mendocino County Homeless Services Planning Group has convened an ad hoc committee to address the immediate needs for emergency shelter space. The ad hoc group is working with the guidance of Catholic Charities of Santa Rosa, a non-profit agency with extensive experience providing an array of homeless services in Northern California. Possible long term options include ways to offer safe parking and camping that are clean and well-managed, along with increasing the availability of housing stock throughout the county and helping individuals and families overcome barriers to get into that permanent home.

Long-term solutions are not going to happen overnight, however. Housing issues are complicated and multifaceted, and funding for many federal assistance programs has declined since 2001. A start in the near term is supporting local non-profits, cities and county agencies as they work hard to serve those in need. After all, the health of our whole community suffers when some community members don’t have a roof over their heads.

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