



## **Testimony of Rick DeAngelis, Good Samaritan Haven, Washington County January 18, 2023**

For the record, my name is Richard DeAngelis and I am the Co-Director of the Good Samaritan Haven or “Good Sam” for short. We provide shelter and services to individual adults experiencing homelessness in Washington County.

Over 30 years ago, Good Sam was established and initially operated by volunteers - many from area faith communities. The goal was to provide shelter to a significant but small number of unsheltered persons in the Barre Montpelier area and to treat shelter “guests” with dignity and respect. Over the years, the need for shelter and related services steadily grew in Washington County . We squeezed more beds into our very modest shelter building and used church basements during the coldest months.

As we all know a dramatic surge in the number of homeless occurred in 2020 with the onset of COVID. It challenged us as an organization to develop more shelter beds, provide services in the motels, offer street outreach and a COVID testing and vaccination program.

Over the last three years, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Washington County has fluctuated between 350 and 450 people in a motel, shelter and or on the streets. For Washington County, this is a rate of 72 homeless per 10,000 people - an extremely high rate relative to recent city and state rates.

### **Who are these individuals experiencing homelessness?**

Tragically, about 20% of them are children living in a motel with a parent. Altogether about 10% of all of the households experiencing homelessness were families with children;

About 70% are adults who are by themselves or some with a domestic partner. Our organization works with this part of the population in our shelter system, at the Hilltop Inn or on the Streets. Each of these individuals' experience is unique with their own story to tell.

However, there are some striking characteristics and trends that I want to share with you which need to be considered as we develop solutions:

**Almost 80% of our shelter guests report having a disabling mental health condition.** These numbers are self-reported - we don't know the nature of the condition but the high number reporting indicates how much people are suffering. In the last two weeks at the 31 bed Welcome Center Shelter two of our guests had to be hospitalized because of suicidal ideation;

**One-third of our shelter guests reported alcohol and/or drug abuse as a disabling condition.** It is a constant challenge to keep our guests and staff safe in an environment with widespread abuse of substances. We need more recovery oriented shelter options;

**There are a growing number of older persons experiencing homelessness in Central Vermont and nationally.** Since opening the Welcome Center with 31 beds in July over a third of our guests have been over 60 years old; at the Hilltop Inn about one quarter of the guests are over 60. Many of these individuals have serious health care concerns including compromised mobility, respiratory conditions and dementia. The streets or a shelter is a difficult place to be as you grow older;

**The number of individuals living on the streets - the unsheltered homeless or "rough sleepers" has risen dramatically in recent years in Washington County and nationally.** We counted 86 unsheltered homeless in our region in September. The "rough sleepers" are more likely to have significant physical, behavioral and mental health challenges. Many are challenging to safely house in emergency shelters. We need a more refined strategy for helping them.

**Finally, we at Good Sam observe that most of our guests have limited or non-existent support systems of family and friends.** Homelessness for them is a great loneliness. Like all of us, they need friendship, community and connection. As I think about this I recall the famous phrase from the Lawrence Mill Workers Strike of 1912 - "Bread for all, and Roses too." Meaning let's find solutions to homelessness that support each person's heart and dignity as well as their housing and service needs.

Thank you for your consideration.

Rick DeAngelis  
Good Samaritan Haven