

When home is spelled H-O-T-E-L



By Sister Jean Orsuto, Director, Emmanuel Community Care Center

Living without a home is something few readers have experienced. In fact, it's hard to even imagine what that really looks and feels like. The daily realities - the struggle to find normalcy, keep a schedule, meet basic needs, and maintain mental health and balance - are harder than they should be. And challenges can deepen when children are involved. What happens to critical school and peer connections? And how are children staying healthy during their out-of-school time?

Too many northeast Ohioans experience this as their reality.

As pandemic-related aid disappears, eviction rates are on the rise. Many Ohio community action agencies had received large sums of money to help people pay their rent and avoid eviction. In Trumbull County, we received word last week our

local agency had run out of money and at least 60 people were waiting for help. Some other collaborating agencies have funding to help, but not enough to keep up with need. Most will exhaust that funding this week, and some who go unhelped may become homeless. In addition, affordable and subsidized housing options in our region are limited. This fuels the homelessness crisis on both ends - launching more households into housing instability and stalling their move out of shelters into viable living arrangements.

When it comes to serving the homeless, the fact is there are never enough resources. We have to stay flexible, creative, and solution-oriented.

Often, our solutions are imperfect.

But their imperfections help remind us exactly why housing stability is so important.

For example, in Trumbull County - as in many other northeast Ohio counties - we are using hotel rooms to house some homeless individuals and families. Right now, three or four families with several children between them are living in hotels. This practice started during the pandemic, as social distancing was important and traditional shelter settings felt unsafe. We were primarily placing the elderly and families with our hotel partners, as they were at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. As the risk subsided, we have continued to use hotels to maximize our capacity to help. As traditional shelter settings can be less IDEAL for some households (like women with children), hotels may provide a better option.

But if you think living in a hotel long term sounds like a fun option - it's not. It's a last resort. And some families are spending upwards of two to three months calling these spaces home.

Imagine meeting your family's basic needs - like eating. The hotel room placements have only a microwave and small refrigerator, with no true kitchen space and limited if any counter space. Accessing food, bringing it in, and preparing a few healthy meals a day is a huge hardship. Time that should be dedicated to job searches and housing searches is wasted on these inefficiencies. And many end up eating poorly, a practice that brings a whole slew of physical and psychological ramifications with it.

Imagine your mental health. There are many psychological effects of knowing you don't have a home and the uncertainty that accompanies this. Most parents have a deep drive to provide a stable home for their families. While there may be some relief about the temporary stability, nobody wants to live in a hotel. Socially, kids and adults alike are disconnected from peer networks with no real chance of forging new ones. Smaller school systems may struggle to transport these children to their home schools, so gaps in schooling are not uncommon. And connection to healthy outdoor spaces or play spaces is limited.

Imagine raising your children. Where is the quiet space to do homework? To take a break and swing or shoot a basketball? Even "little" things, like special holiday gifts or traditions, are a challenge. Families in hotel placements may not have the means or opportunity to celebrate holidays and special occasions. Just last week, we worked to get Easter baskets to the children in these families. How sad would it be to be forgotten by the Easter bunny?

It's important that we remember exactly how the homelessness experience rumbles the very ground these individuals and families walk on. Thinking of a hotel as "home" can help us have understanding and empathy. And it helps us as we roll up our sleeves to create solutions. We have an immediate need for more funding and resources to help prevent looming evictions. And long-term, we need to build more affordable and subsidized housing options for our low-income community.

If we don't address the housing crisis, we will continue to see many more homeless people in our system.

Though preferable to a car, tent, or laundromat - a shelter or hotel is a sad "home". To get somewhere happier, we ultimately need to remove homelessness from the equation.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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