

ANOTHER VIEW

Homeless Coalition holds real promise to finding our solution

By Laura Eastes Akers

In Ardmore and across the country, homelessness is a complex and growing problem.

As homelessness grew more visible in downtown Ardmore, it sparked a community discourse: Why are so many people homeless? Why is homelessness a problem in Ardmore? Why can't we just solve this problem (or at least remove them from downtown)?

Consider these cases, which the Grace Center of Southern Oklahoma's staff and volunteers have encountered this summer:

A stroke survivor in his early 60s became homeless this spring when his Ardmore apartment was condemned. His limited resources mixed with a lack of affordable housing in Ardmore prohibited him from securing a home. When he didn't receive a stimulus check, the Grace Day Center Director investigated. His Social Security number was compromised. He was a victim of fraud, including a stimulus check scam.

A 40-year-old U.S. Army veteran suffers from severe mental illness. His benefits can cover monthly rent but his delusions prevent him from sleeping inside the apartment that the Grace Day Center helped him obtain.

And a 48-year-old Ada mother — who cannot recall the last time she and her 14-year-old son had stable housing. A friend dropped them off in Ardmore at the Salvation Army, which could provide only a short-term solution to a long-term problem.

When most people hear "homeless," a very stereotyped image comes to mind: a person with poor hygiene and dirty clothes, with a lack of desire to work, and who is addicted to drugs or alcohol. A dangerous, distrustful person. While this can be the case, in the Grace Center's tenure of working with Ardmore's homeless community, our staff and volunteers see humans trapped in their unique, complex web of circumstances, stripped of stigma and stereotypes. In reality, most homeless residents are out of sight, and they include families with children.

Many think Ardmore's homeless arrive from elsewhere, riding a pipeline from larger cities to abuse our good will or naiveté. Indeed, some come from larger cities and end up in Ardmore.

However, an internal Grace Center client survey found that two-thirds of our clients consider themselves locals, having attended high school in Carter County, held jobs with the area's largest employers, and have family members living nearby. The jail-to-homelessness-pipeline, and the forthcoming foster-care-to-homelessness-pipeline, are much more real. For better or worse, Ardmore is home to the least of these.

Nevertheless, this summer provided a stark homelessness revelation in downtown. Homeless residents have roamed the downtown streets, trashed and camped outside business' doors, including the Grace Center's. The community has turned to us with a mix of reactions. Many have wanted to know how they can help. Others offered contradictory accusations: "You're not doing enough to serve the homeless," and "The homeless are enabled by the Grace Center and all these other service organizations."

Moreover, COVID-19 and the need to lower the risk of viral transmission at the Grace Day Center has created new difficulties for our homeless residents and the community. Currently, only 10 clients may access services at a time in the Day Center. When 10 clients are inside the building, others wait outside the door or across the street in the shade. For many, the image of people sitting or lying down, presents an array of emotions and thoughts.

In an ideal world, the solution to ending homelessness would be pretty simple. A one-size-fits-all program that moves people out of homelessness while ending their suffering to housing and happiness. There is no program that works that way. Homelessness is just too multifaceted.

In Ardmore, a patchwork safety net, woven by nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and volunteers struggles to prevent homelessness by providing meals, clothing, and shelter to those who are homeless. The Band-Aid approach cannot address systemic issues. More collaboration is needed to optimize services, engage long-term solutions, and reduce redundancy. Our current Band-Aid approach to homelessness leaves indelible scars.

This month, the Grace Center is convening a Homeless Coalition with community partners and collaborators. With the help of a facilitator, there will be guided conversations and discussions resulting in a well-defined, written community action plan — one with practical approaches to reducing and eliminating homelessness. Leaders from government, business, faith, and social services are coming to the table. After all, our homeless are exiting our jails, hospitals, and crisis units, even our high school classrooms and foster homes, with no prospects but the streets.

Ardmore is facing a homelessness crisis. This is the time to develop an Ardmore solution to our Ardmore problem.

— Laura Eastes Akers is the executive director of The Grace Center of Southern Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization committed to preventing homelessness while providing essential services to those in the community experiencing homelessness.