

UPDATE REPORT

**on the plans and activities of the
Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force
on Housing & Homelessness**

September 2024

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TASK FORCE MEMBERS

The *Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force on Housing & Homelessness* was established in 2023 by the City Council. Membership currently includes:

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Lara Auclair, Grant Writer, Planning Department, *City of Woonsocket*

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to respond to the many voices in our community who have been asking what our *Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force on Housing & Homelessness* has been doing since it was established by the City Council in 2023.

The issues of housing and homelessness in Woonsocket and throughout our nation go far beyond those people experiencing unsheltered homelessness that we see on the street. They are our most unfortunate and their circumstances are the most serious, but they are the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds more are in shelters, in cars, or staying in someone else's home or apartment that isn't big enough for everyone. Thousands more live in public-supported housing or are barely hanging on to their housing – one unexpected expense from losing the place they call home.

This is not the first time our community has had to deal with these issues. The establishment of public housing in 1937 eventually led to local housing authorities, the creation of the federal *Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)* in 1964, and the construction of the city's four high-rise buildings for the elderly and disabled. Two other public housing developments soon followed, as did 'Section 8' vouchers and other assistance programs. But support for public housing receded in the 1980s and '90s and never came back.

In 1988, a city task force was created to address the growing issue of homelessness, primarily caused by economic factors, the deinstitutionalization of services for those with mental illness, and a pronounced increase in substance abuse. That task force made several recommendations, which resulted in the establishment of two shelters, one for homeless families and one for single men, now under the operation of *Community Care Alliance*, and the founding of the Woonsocket Housing Development Corporation, now known as *NeighborWorks*. Together, these entities and other housing and social service agencies have served thousands of city residents, helping them put their lives back together.

The crisis eased for a while, but the country's housing market collapsed in the financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting recession. It has never fully recovered. The impact on Woonsocket's housing market has been severe, with recent spikes in rental costs and home prices. Worse, wages and opportunities for city residents haven't kept pace with these increases. Adding fuel to the fire, the city is experiencing its share of the opioid epidemic, we continue to have among the highest rates of poverty, domestic violence, and child neglect/abuse in the state, and we have among the lowest levels of educational achievement, high school graduation, and median income.

Providing affordable, secure access to housing for all city residents is a crucial first step in addressing all these issues. Soon, our task force will offer a specific plan, based on the information in this report, and we are determined to bring our community together to achieve it. It is a challenge we have met before and we can do it again. Nothing less than the future of our community depends on it.

PART 1: The Issue

How many people are currently on the street and in shelters in Woonsocket?

Though the numbers constantly fluctuate, local agencies report that there are at least **60** people experiencing **unsheltered homelessness** currently living on the city's streets and about **160 people** in short- and mid-term shelters, with long wait lists. Though Woonsocket's population accounts for only **4%** of the state's population, we have about **10%** of the state's unsheltered homeless population and **10%** of all those in emergency shelters (not including the wait lists). There has been a **35% increase** in the city's homeless population from last year.

There are also **hundreds** of individuals and families without housing of their own who have found temporary housing with family members, friends, co-workers, etc. They often spend a few days, weeks, or months sleeping on couches, in basements, and other ad hoc arrangements before moving on to another place. In addition, **thousands** more families and individuals in the city are on the brink of homelessness – only a health crisis, job loss, or unexpected expense away from losing their home or apartment. Their vulnerability presents a crisis for the entire community.

Data on this issue is not centralized. Several state departments and service agencies that deal with housing compile piecemeal data on housing and homelessness. *HousingWorks Rhode Island at Roger Williams University* provides an annual report with broad data on housing and homelessness in the state, some of which is broken down by communities. Since “point in time” survey data is unavailable, a complete profile of homelessness in the state or each community is not possible, but compiling available data together does allow for a reasonably accurate picture.

To give an overview, according to the *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, on one night in the U.S. in January 2023, approximately **684,000 people were identified as homeless**. Of these:

- There were 463,600 **single adults** (68% of all homeless).
 - More than half were unsheltered;
 - 68.5% were male; 30% were female; 1.5% were transgender or gender non-conforming;
 - 30% were over the age of 55;
 - 22% were chronically homeless, many with mental illness or substance use issues;
 - 8% were veterans.
- Another 186,000 **people in families** – or about 57,600 **family households** – were homeless (27% of all homeless); nearly 10% of them were living in cars, on the street, or in another place unfit or not designed for human habitation.
- Another 34,700 **unaccompanied youth** were homeless (5% of all homeless); 91% of these young people were between the ages of 18-24, while the remaining 9% were under age 18.

The link below provides more detail:

<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/>

In Rhode Island, from 2007 to 2023, the total population of people experiencing homelessness increased by **32%** and those without any appropriate shelter at all increased by **582%**.

What are the dominant factors driving people into homelessness?

1. **Lack of affordable housing, for ownership or rent**, is the single largest factor driving homelessness. In 2022, only 24 building permits were issued for single family homes in the city; none for multiple family homes. The average cost of a single family home in Woonsocket two years ago was **\$325,000**; that number has grown this year to **\$365,900** – an increase of almost 12% in two years. With current mortgage interest rates around 6-7% today, an annual income of **\$110,000-\$120,000** would be needed to purchase a home in the city. As of 2022, only **19%** of Woonsocket residents had that level of income.

The **median household income** in Woonsocket last year was **\$48,822** – less than half the income needed to purchase an average-priced home in the city. Consequently, only **38%** of the city’s residents own their own home, 61% of whom are still paying off their mortgage.

A **one-bedroom apartment** in Woonsocket currently averages about \$1,000-\$1,050/month, which requires an annual income of at least **\$41,000**. A **two-bedroom apartment** averages \$1,500-\$1,600/month, which requires an annual income of at least **\$62,000** – too high for most Woonsocket residents.

Almost **16%** of Woonsocket’s housing units – about 3,000 units –are designated as **deed restricted affordable housing** (formerly known as *subsidized housing*): units that have been built with a government subsidy or set aside for the elderly, those with disabilities or special needs, or low- and moderate-income individuals or families. [Tenants qualify as *low-income* households if their annual income is not more than 60% of the area’s median income (~ \$29,400 in Woonsocket) or as *moderate-income* households if their annual income is no more than 80% of the area’s median income (~ \$39,200 in Woonsocket).] In total, an estimated **6,500-7,500** city residents occupy these units, or about **18%** of the city’s residents.

The rental costs for these apartments are capped at **30%** of the tenant’s annual income. For the *Woonsocket Housing Authority*, which governs about 40% of all deed restricted affordable housing units in the city, the wait list is almost **530**.

More than a quarter of home-owners and **almost half of renters** in Woonsocket are “cost burdened”, meaning that they spend **30% or more** of their annual income on housing costs, which puts them in danger of losing their housing or forcing them to buy less food, skip payments on utilities or cars, or forego medications and other health care. Nationally, **70%** of the lowest-wage households routinely spend **more than half of their income** on rent.

2. **Increasing rental costs** constitutes the second largest factor. In the past year, rents in Woonsocket have increased by an average of **10%** for a one-bedroom apartment and just **over 50%** for a two-bedroom apartment.

Too many landlords – many of them corporate landlords – drive up their prices because they can, not because they need to. These cost increases are too high for most of Woonsocket’s population. [For example, Rock Ridge Apartments doubled the rent from \$400 to \$800 this year; residents in deed restricted affordable units are protected (at no more than 30% of their income), but other low-income residents have been evicted or priced out of these apartments.]

Other *prominent factors* include:

- **Unemployment and under-employment** (working but not making a wage high enough to afford living costs). Woonsocket’s unemployment rate, as of June 2024, is **5.7%** – tied with Providence for the highest in the state. Rhode Island’s average unemployment rate is the same as the nation’s at **4.1%**. There is no available data for under-employment.

'Hanna', in her late 20s, was born and raised in the city. She completed high school and some college before deciding to leave school and go to work. She got a full-time job in the service sector and was able to find a nearby apartment she could afford, but her landlord kept raising the rent. Just when she could no longer afford it, she found a better paying job. That helped, but her rent increased again. Although she was still paying less than the average rent in Woonsocket, she had to move out and share an apartment with a relative. That will save her some money, but she still won't be able to put anything into savings.

- **Domestic violence**, especially for women with children. Between 2016 and 2022, the most recent data, Woonsocket had the highest rate of domestic violence in Rhode Island. In 2023, more than 10% of all emergency shelter, transitional housing, and safe haven beds in the state were targeted to survivors of domestic violence and their families.
- **Mental health issues.**
- **The opioid crisis and other substance use issues.**
- **The rising costs of medicine, transportation & food.**
- **Access to affordable health care**, especially the lack of a **state medical hospital** that is obligated to treat low-income elderly, adults, and children.
- **Access to affordable nursing home care, assisted living, and respite care.**

Other *contributing factors* include:

- **Child abuse and neglect.** In 2023, Woonsocket had the highest level of child abuse and neglect in the state, both of which, especially neglect, are strongly linked to poverty, a lack of education, and the absence of basic life-skills training. When families fall apart as a result of these issues, children often end up traumatized and in the care of the state, planting the seeds for a new generation of adults with the same issues.
- **Unexpected expenses.** These most notably include health crises, especially for those who are uninsured or under-insured. These and other types of large, unexpected expenses can drain the resources of low-income and working class families in a very short time.
- **NIMBYism.** An anagram for *'Not In My Back Yard'*, it refers to the opposition of homeowners and business owners to accept the placement of homeless shelter spaces and services in or near their neighborhoods or commercial areas.

- **Historical and structural racism.** Nationally, most minority groups, especially Black and indigenous peoples, experience far higher rates of homelessness than White people. While the Black community constitutes about 13% of the nation’s population, almost 40% of homeless individuals and more than half of homeless families with children are Black.
 - This is partly due to historic practices such as ‘redlining’, which, until recently, legally kept Black adults from obtaining mortgages or business loans, and moving into higher income areas even when they could afford to do so. Discrimination in employment and education also kept Black people from attaining higher paying jobs and career opportunities. While these practices are mostly illegal now, their effects have persisted through the years.
 - The rate of incarceration among the Black population tripled between 1968 and 2016; it is now more than six times the rate of incarceration among the White population. Black and Hispanic people of all ages are far more likely to be targeted, profiled, arrested and killed for minor offenses than White people. A criminal history can be an obstacle to obtaining housing and employment, which increases the risk of homelessness.

What proportion of the local area’s homeless population have substance use and/or mental health issues?

It’s very difficult to say on the local or state level, but *not* nearly as many as people believe.

According to the *U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, on any given night in 2023 almost **a third of homeless individuals** reported having a serious mental health issue and **nearly a quarter** had conditions related to chronic substance abuse. These are not separate populations; many of those who are chronically homeless suffer from both addiction and mental health issues.

People with mental health and addiction issues have *health* issues – these are *not* lifestyle choices.

- **Mental illness** can be a result of severe trauma and/or congenital physical conditions (i.e., brain dysfunction). Many forms of mental illness are treatable, though for some, accepting and following a regimen of medical and/or therapeutic treatment is difficult. For some forms of mental illness, there is no effective treatment.
 - A 2021 report from the *Mental Health Association of R.I.* and the *Brown Initiative for Policy* stated that there are “gaping holes” in Rhode Island’s continuum of mental health care. Individuals in mental health crisis can wait anywhere from days to months to access certain levels of care. Workforce shortages, lack of diversity in the workforce, and insurance barriers are all factors. Rhode Island “consistently underperforms” the national rate of consumers who report positively about behavioral health service outcomes.

- **Addiction** is a physical condition and a medical issue. Many people can drink or use substances occasionally/socially and this does not result in addiction. Others can become addicted and still manage to function at an acceptable level for an extended period of time. Those whose addictions are so severe that it ultimately leads to personal collapse and homelessness are very sick and deserve compassion and treatment. Whatever pleasure or benefit they may have experienced when they first started using drugs or alcohol has long since ended. They are trapped in a cycle of misery.
 - Addiction and its self-defeating coping behaviors often drive people out of their families, friendships, and/or public housing, but it's also true that the immense pressures of being homeless, with no end in sight, can lead people to self-medicate with alcohol and/or drugs, often leading to addiction. Self-medicating can serve multiple functions: numbing the physical and emotional pain resulting from homelessness; staying awake all night for fear that they could be assaulted or robbed in their sleep; or, assisting with sleep.
 - The opioid addiction crisis, caused primarily by the over-prescription of opioid-based pain relievers to people who have had surgeries or suffer chronic pain, has seriously worsened this problem in recent years.

The medical and social service communities are also seeing a growing number of homeless elderly, families, and people in active addiction who have serious health issues – untreated traumatic brain injury, dementia, cancer, and heart disease, among others.

What are the public *misperceptions* about those who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness and how can these misperceptions be addressed?

The public misperceptions about people experiencing homelessness, especially those who are unsheltered, that persist throughout our city, state and nation, include the following:

- **All people who are homeless are addicts or suffering from profound mental illness.** As noted above, some people experiencing homelessness suffer from one or both of these diseases, but they do not constitute all or even a majority of those who are homeless. It must be understood that homelessness itself can be a cause of addiction and mental illness (i.e., stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts).
- **The population of those who are homeless only comprises single adults.** According to the *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, about 68% of homeless people are single adults. Just under 28% are families with children and about 5% are unaccompanied youth.
- **Those who are homeless often refuse offers of appropriate assistance.** Local and state agencies who provide direct services to those who are homeless report that very few people decline assistance; the vast majority are eager to ask for and receive assistance. For those who do decline help, it's often because emergency or short-term shelters, where many people are grouped together in close quarters, often trigger high anxiety in those who are coping with trauma.

- **They are dangerous.** Nationally, those who are homeless rarely commit crimes of violence, and when they do it is usually perpetrated against other homeless individuals. More common nonviolent crimes, such as shoplifting, littering, loitering, and the use of illegal substances, are often the result of a lack of housing, desperation, addiction, mental illness and/or discouragement. But “around **14% to 21%** of unhoused people are estimated to have been the **victim** of violence, compared with around **2%** of the general population,” according to research in the journal *Violence and Victims*, as cited in a 2023 news report.
- **They have somehow lost their human dignity and worth because of their circumstances.** Most major world religions teach that human dignity is inherent to all people by the grace of God and cannot be erased. It is not a sin to be homeless and for the overwhelming majority of people who are homeless, it is not a choice either. Moreover, many individuals and families who have been homeless have fought their way back, found appropriate housing and needed services, and successfully re-integrated into society.
- **Their housing and homelessness issues would disappear if they would only “get a job”.** A 2024 report by the *Logan Center for Urban Investigative Reporting* states that 40-60% of those who are homeless are employed at least part-time.

For the unemployed, problems in maintaining personal cleanliness and a permanent address, obtaining reliable transportation, coping with physical and mental health issues, acquiring proper identification and personal documents, getting proper sleep, receiving job training, and even purchasing and charging a cell phone are among the many obstacles to attaining a good paying, full-time job that will help lift those who are homeless out of their situation.

- **Criminalizing homelessness is a solution to the problem.** Camping bans, coerced treatment, and a “handcuffs instead of housing” approach, according to the *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, are ineffective and costly. Plus, imprisonment only makes it more difficult for those who are homeless to break out of the cycle of poverty, as a history of incarceration makes it harder to find employment and to be approved for housing.
- **“Subsidized housing” is a handout that enables poverty, unemployment and addiction.** Successful experiences in Houston and other communities show that providing affordable housing to those without housing – and without requiring certain conditions – is a **proven first step** towards getting people back on their feet. Of course, this is providing that their housing is accompanied by the support services they need to heal and prosper (i.e., physical and mental health services, employment training, addiction therapies, etc.).
- **Housing all those who are homeless is just too expensive.** A 2023 study in Massachusetts shows that the *net savings* to a community for housing each person who is homeless is about **\$10,500/year**. This is largely due to the lower cost of housing when compared to the health care and public safety costs of attending to those who are homeless.

Hopefully, getting information out to the public will help educate people about the true causes, actual circumstances, and necessary solutions to this issue. Once informed of the facts, it is our hope that attitudes will improve toward these most unfortunate members of our community.

PART 2: The Solution

Have any communities in the country successfully addressed the issues of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing?

Yes. Houston, TX, (the fourth largest city in the country) moved more than 25,000 people who were homeless into apartments or homes in about a decade, and cut its unsheltered homeless population by more than 60% – from 8,500 to 3,200 – though most of that reduction was achieved in just five years. For the city’s homeless veterans, the wait for permanent housing was reduced from 720 days to just 32 days.

Newark, NJ, managed a 57% decline in its homeless population. In Chattanooga, TN,

“Charlie” is in his 60s. Divorced long ago, he raised two children on his own. He was employed for decades at a local chain store, but family and mental health issues eventually intruded on his workplace and he was let go. He went for treatment, but it didn’t seem to help. His children are grown and gone; he hasn’t seen them in years. He was staying with his brother and his family in their home, but was asked to leave a few months ago. His car broke down, but he can’t afford to have it fixed, though it now serves as his ‘home’ – his only shelter from the elements.

unsheltered homelessness is down 40%. Minneapolis’ chronic homelessness dropped 36% in two years. Vero Beach, FL, moved 33% of its homeless population into housing. San Diego, CA, decreased its homeless population by 19%.

Essentially, Houston adopted a **“Housing First”** plan of action that put **housing and servicing the needs of the unsheltered homeless** as its top priority. Generating more affordable housing units was another primary objective. Cooperation between agencies, local government, and the private sector, with one coordinating agency at the top, was also key.

Houston’s plan of action has become a model for other cities (most of the cities listed above based their own plans on Houston’s). Because some of these cities saw less reduction of their homeless population than Houston, housing experts

studied these differences. They concluded that the reasons for the lower reductions were the lack of coordination, energy, and/or resources that were applied to those plans.

Several communities across the country, including in Louisiana, Michigan, Florida, and Tennessee, have begun constructing “cottage neighborhoods” of affordable small homes for low- and middle-income people. One such village, in **Dover, NH**, includes 44 homes, each only 384 square feet with a 160 square foot loft and 12 foot ceilings. These “tiny homes” are being constructed for the town’s service community: teachers, first-responders and care-givers, who make entry level salaries of \$40,000 to \$45,000 a year. The homes are rented to occupants at an average rate of \$1,100 per month. Each house is designed to feel like a home, not an apartment; these houses may also be ideal as a ‘starter home’ or for someone looking to downsize.

What needs to happen to fully address the issues of affordable housing and homelessness in Woonsocket?

There are many and various needs that must be met before all those who cannot afford or maintain a place of their own can find appropriate, affordable housing. These include:

- Adopting an overall community *plan of action*, based on Houston’s plan, that makes **“housing first”** the top priority. This means housing unsheltered homeless *without* requiring them to meet unrealistic conditions first, such as breaking an addiction or getting a job. A preliminary plan is being drafted for review by the Task Force.
- Establishing an **‘umbrella’ agency or organization**, such as Houston’s *Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County*, to coordinate and streamline efforts among existing local agencies who provide housing and serve the homeless population.
- Providing and staffing more **short- and mid-term shelter spaces** with **onsite ‘navigation centers’** that provide support services to connect these people with life-skills instruction, job training, education, medical and mental health services, SNAP, job applications, etc.
 - *Community Care Alliance (CCA)* currently operates a shelter program in the city for families, couples, and single-parents with children, which currently houses **55** people – 26 adults and 29 children – in two buildings with office space for support services.
 - *CCA* also operates a short- and mid-term shelter program for families and individuals in a motel building with **48** units on Rt. 116 in Smithfield. This site shelters **more than 100** individuals and families, but the wait list is long. State funding for the staffing and rental costs of this program has been extended through 2025.
 - Woonsocket’s *Harvest Community Church* provides **18** overnight beds for single adult males from November to April each year.
 - These existing programs, taken together, are **not** sufficient to meet the current need for short- and mid-term shelter.
- Constructing new **affordable housing for ownership and rent**.
 - There are currently **3,052** deed-restricted affordable housing units in Woonsocket. Due to zoning and permitting obstacles, a lack of incentives for contractors and developers, and low profit margins in affordable and multi-family home construction, **Rhode Island produces less new housing than any state in the country**. Consequently, the construction of affordable housing, including ‘starter homes’ and apartments, also lags behind, especially in higher income suburban communities.
 - The time horizon for the construction of new affordable housing is long, largely due to state regulations and NIMBYism. According to *NeighborWorks*, each affordable housing project takes an average of **6-7 years** and often longer.
 - The *Woonsocket Housing Authority* has a stock of **1,207** affordable housing units spread across four senior high-rise complexes (Crepeau Court, Kennedy Manor, Parkview Manor and St. Germain Manor) and two family developments (Morin Heights and Veterans Memorial). These units house just over **2,200** city residents. 85% of the units in the high rise-buildings are set aside for the elderly (age 62+), while 15% are restricted to those with disabilities. Almost all of the family apartments are for low-income families, with a few set aside for those with disabilities. There are almost **530** people on *WHA’s* waiting lists.

- However, virtually all of the *WHA*'s housing stock, while well-maintained, are 60-80 years old and no new housing construction is planned. Also, the high cost of lead-paint mitigation, required by the state but without sufficient funding, has hampered efforts to make many of the family units safe for children. This means that this affordable housing option is in danger of failing in the foreseeable future unless preventative, restorative, and replacement measures are taken soon.
 - *NeighborWorks* has already constructed more than **220** affordable housing units in Woonsocket (apartments and single family homes). It is currently developing another **155** affordable housing apartment units in the city at four different sites, and another **130-140** more units in North Smithfield and Glocester. Even with these projects, the waiting list at *NeighborWorks* for affordable housing in northern R.I. exceeds **3,500**.
 - *NeighborWorks* and the *WHA* together constitute almost half the current stock of the city's affordable housing. The remaining units are funded by the *U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development* (through its *Housing Choice Voucher Program*, also known as 'Section 8'), *Community Care Alliance*, *Sojourner House*, and scattered sites supported by various other government programs.
- **Streamlining the application process and moving those experiencing unsheltered homelessness to the top of the *Housing Authority's* wait list** for deed restricted affordable housing.
 - **Tailoring services** to the needs of each homeless person and family to assist and support them in transitioning to permanent affordable housing.
 - Continuing to build on **the ability of the city's leadership to understand and cope with affordable housing and homelessness issues**. The current mayor regularly interacts with the Task Force, which is chaired by the City Council Vice-President, and has supported its efforts. One other City Councilor is a member and several other Councilors have also attended a few of its meetings. The mayor recently appointed a new director of the city's *Department of Human Services* who has long and deep experience working on the issues of affordable housing and homelessness, but that position is only part-time.
 - **Establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with the public and all stakeholders**. City leaders need to anticipate concerns, provide full transparency, and give residents and businesses all the information they need to feel informed, included, and comfortable with the city's plan to resolve housing and homelessness issues.

All these actions need to happen simultaneously, as each one is part of an overall strategy to end homelessness in our community. Some of these tasks are the primary responsibility of the federal, state and/or local **government**; some are best handled by nonprofit **social service agencies**; some need the initiative and support of the **for-profit sector**, especially the construction industry, large corporations, insurance companies, and financial institutions; and some are best undertaken by **faith communities, landlords, and individual volunteers**.

All of these stakeholders must work in cooperation with each other toward a shared goal of eradicating homelessness while preserving the dignity and worth of each person.

PART 3: Where We Are Now

What percentage of Woonsocket’s population has a serious housing problem?

According to *HousingWorks R.I.’s 2023 Housing Fact Book* and local service and housing agencies, 7,900 city residents – **18%** of the population – reside in deed-restricted affordable housing. Of current homeowners, 26% are ‘cost burdened’ (paying 30% or more of their annual income on housing); at an average of 2.5 people per household, that’s about 4,100 residents or almost **10%** of city residents. 47% of renters are ‘cost burdened’; at an average of 2.5 people per apartment, that’s almost 11,900 residents, or **28%** of the population. Add in those living without any appropriate shelter at all, or in emergency shelters, or on wait lists for affordable housing, and that’s another 4,200 people, or **10%** of city residents.

Allowing for some overlap among those who are on wait lists and those already in housing crisis, it is accurate to state that **between 24,000 and 26,600** men, women and children, or **56% to 62% of the city’s population**, are experiencing serious housing issues.

“Jennifer” was forced to leave her partner and her home in the city to seek safety. She and her three children first moved to a one-bedroom apartment, but the space was tight and the landlord raised the rent. Unable to find an affordable apartment on her own, a social service agency helped her and the children find a temporary solution. She had been working full-time when she left her home, but lost her job in the shuffle of events. She has no idea where she and her kids will go next.

What has the *Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force on Housing & Homelessness* done so far and what does it plan to do?

The Task Force has spent months gathering, sharing, and discussing the information reflected in this report, and it has initiated several projects to help alleviate the immediate need for emergency shelter for individuals and families. In cooperation with local community service agencies, the *R.I. Department of Housing*, the *Diocese of Providence*, and local faith communities, these projects include:

1. **Revisions to the “Coordinated Entry System”.** This system is required by the *U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development (HUD)*. It tracks the location of available shelter beds throughout the state and organizes the placement of clients. The Task Force advocated for improved coordination between the state and local service agencies and succeeded in getting better cooperation and more timely placement of local clients in local shelters.
2. **Purchase and installation of The Dignity Bus.** This vehicle was purchased and renovated by the city and placed in the parking lot of the former Holy Family Church with the permission of the *Diocese of Providence* and the support of *Holy Trinity Parish*.

The vehicle can shelter up to **20** people each night, and is staffed and operated by *Community Care Alliance*, while the city maintains ownership of the bus. Funding for the service program had been provided by *The R.I. Foundation* for six months, but funding ran out earlier this year. Additionally, there were several issues with the bus itself that prevented its full use during the winter (i.e., broken door, inadequate heating, and plumbing issues).

The state had indicated that it would pick up the funding for FY 2024-25, but has not yet done so. There are indications that this program may resume operation by the start of winter. The state has released a ‘Request for Proposals (RFP)’ for new shelter funding, which invites proposals from local communities for new projects and continuations of current projects, such as emergency shelter, warming centers, rapid rehousing, housing problem solving, street outreach, and seasonal shelters.

3. **Continuing and Expanding the Northern R.I. Shelter Program (All Seasons Suites).** There are two motel buildings, 48 units each, located on Rt. 116 in Smithfield. Currently, only one of the buildings is being used as temporary shelter for **more than 100 people**, which is staffed and operated by *Community Care Alliance (CCA)*.

CCA has proposed that the state purchase both buildings along with 12 acres of land behind them to develop affordable housing. The property owner has made known his desire to sell the property. The state’s *Department of Housing (DOH)* claims that it has made efforts to contact the owner during the past two years to open negotiations, but no progress has been made. It is doubtful this will move forward without more aggressive action by *DOH*.

Ideas in discussion include:

1. **Rehabilitating the former Holy Family Convent Building.** This South Main St. facility is privately owned, but the owner is willing to sell it for affordable housing units. The state has issued a ‘Request for Proposals (RFP)’ and *NeighborWorks* is in the process of applying to the state for the funding to purchase and rehab the building. Once the building is completed, *NeighborWorks* will allow another service agency to staff and operate it as a short- or mid-term shelter program.
2. **Rehabilitating the former Holy Family Rectory Building.** This building, located on South Main St. is owned by the *Diocese of Providence*. Discussions have taken place between the Diocese and the Task Force about using this building for transitional housing for families, under the operation of the Diocese. However, this project has encountered delays due to restoration costs, including the need for a fire-suppression system and other required renovations totaling an estimated \$200,000.
3. **Building a pallet-shelter village.** This relatively new concept involves constructing a number of small, 70 square-foot single-occupant shelters with basic utilities, together with a center that provides support services. Providence’s [ECHO Village](#) and [The Elmwood Community Shelter](#) in Burlington, VT, are models for consideration, as much for the lessons they have learned as for their successes. [Click on [Pallet Shelter](#) for more information about single-occupant shelters.] While this is a promising strategy, state building code and fire code agencies have been very slow to adopt regulatory changes to advance this option.
4. **Developing ‘cottage neighborhoods’ of ‘tiny houses’.** These housing clusters of small homes of 350-400 square-feet are attainable for those individuals and couples (perhaps with a child or two) with incomes of about \$40,000 to \$45,000. (See **Dover, NH**, page 9.)

What other strategies have been attempted or implemented to reduce and/or serve those who are homeless in Rhode Island and Woonsocket?

1. The *U.S. Interagency Council*, established during the Obama administration, created a federal plan of action to eradicate homelessness based on strategies to create programs that complement each other. However, this plan has never been fully implemented. The *R.I. Interagency Council* – based on the federal model – was established in 2007 and made permanent in 2011, but has been inactive for the past eight years.
2. The *R.I. Housing Resources Commission* produced a 53-page statewide plan in 2012 called ***Opening Doors Rhode Island, A Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*** that aimed to eliminate chronic homelessness within five years. The plan called for more affordable housing, transitional housing, and support services to directly address all homelessness issues. However, funding cuts on the federal and state level in the ensuing years, coupled with a lack of political leadership and will, left these goals unrealized.
3. In 2015, the state also created **Community Health Equity Zones (HEZ)**, funded by the state through existing social service agencies. The *Woonsocket HEZ* was established to improve the health and wellbeing of city residents by improving the social determinants of health. The priority areas of the *Woonsocket HEZ* are Overdose Prevention and Recovery, Teen Health, Food Access, Child Maltreatment, and Housing.
4. In the past three years, the General Assembly, under the leadership of the Speaker of the House, initiated and passed more than **25 pieces of legislation** aimed at streamlining and encouraging the development of affordable housing. Most of these bills were also passed by the State Senate and signed by the Governor. However, a lack of incentives for developers and contractors, and difficulties with zoning, insurance, and permit processes, all of which obstruct or delay the construction of affordable housing, have yet to be addressed.
5. This year’s legislative package included a **\$120 million housing bond**, which will be on the ballot for voter approval this November. However, as large as it is, housing experts agree that it is just a start. Massachusetts – with a population 7 times larger than Rhode Island – just announced a **\$6.2 billion** housing bond, more than 50 times the size of Rhode Island’s bond measure.
6. The state has at least three separate entities working on housing issues: The *R.I. Department of Housing*, *Rhode Island Housing*, and the *Housing Resources Commission*. Each of these agencies has distinct missions, but there have been recent issues of overlapping authority that have raised concerns and caused confusion.

The *R.I. Department Of Housing* is working on a new statewide action plan to address housing and homelessness issues. This plan is expected to be presented in early 2025, but will likely take several more months before it receives final approval. Given the urgency of the current situation, this timeline may lead to a plan that is out of date before it’s released.

PART 4: Next Steps

What else needs to happen to reduce our homeless population and provide them with the services they need to fully re-integrate them into society?

1. A full, rapid commitment is required from **state and city leaders** to meet the needs of people who are now, or who are in danger of becoming, homeless. This will require sufficient funding for programs to develop affordable housing options and to provide support for nonprofit service agencies that deal directly with this population.

Specifically, this includes:

- The development of focused and coordinated statewide and local **plans of action** to expand affordable housing and eradicate homelessness. These plans must articulate clear goals and establish specific recommendations with definitive steps to achieve these goals.
- **Communication** between state and local political leaders, the city's legislative delegation, area social service agencies, and other stakeholders *before* the state creates housing policies and establishes regulations.
 - Woonsocket's social service and housing agencies have already established an intricate web of coordinated services that they provide to city residents with housing and other issues. These agencies include: *Community Care Alliance, Thundermist Health Services, NeighborWorks, the Woonsocket Housing Authority, Tides Family Services, Woonsocket Head Start Child Development Association, Connecting for Children and Families* and others. Their resources, already stressed by community needs, are further strained by copious regulations.
- The active support of the **Mayor, City Council, and the city's state legislative delegation** to advocate for:
 - Creating **incentives** for contractors and developers, and **eliminating zoning, permitting, and insurance obstacles** for the construction of affordable housing for ownership and rent;
 - More federal and state '*Continuum of Care*' funding for initiatives to address local homelessness and affordable housing issues;
 - A reduction in **mortgage interest rates**;
 - An increase in federal and state funding for low- and middle-income families to afford **home ownership**;
 - Expanding state funding for emergency **rental assistance**;
 - An increase in state funding for **housing problem-solving** and **eviction prevention**; and,
 - **Timely payments** and **streamlined reimbursement processes** by the state to social service agencies for approved expenditures of state and federal funding.

2. The **commitment of the area’s private sector** to fund the expansion of affordable housing. *Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island* recently provided a **\$4 million grant** to the *Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)*, which will be used to replace the former *Crossroads* building in Providence with more than **175** affordable apartments for low-income residents.

Woonsocket hosts or patronizes several large corporations that could also make a substantial difference, including *CVS, Hanna Instruments, Citizens Bank, Stop & Shop, Cumberland Farms, Dunkin’ Donuts, Ocean State Job Lot, Burger King* and *Cox Communications*.

3. In addition, the state and city need to begin:
 - Using **“Point In Time” (PIT)** count data to guide efforts to end homelessness in the city. When used annually, it is invaluable for planning and identifying areas of growing concern or improvement.
 - Removing **legal penalties** for being homeless (i.e., loitering, sleeping, camping).

“Manuel and Anita”, a married couple in their 30s, bought their first house near the downtown area of the city. Both were employed full-time and they were expecting their second child. After the baby arrived, the cost of child care was almost more than her income, so she chose to stay home with their kids. They struggled for a few years to pay their mortgage and other living expenses, but even with the help of family, they were unable to keep up. They were eventually forced to sell the house and temporarily move in with relatives until they can figure out their next move.

4. **Faith community** leaders in the city have been generous and creative in moving to meet these needs. *The Harvest Community Church, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, VIDA Church, St. James Episcopal Church, and Holy Trinity Parish* have been especially supportive and cooperative in several of these efforts and in providing for those in need through church food pantries, food kitchens, shelter beds, clothing closets, programs for pregnant women and young children, and rental and utilities assistance.

There is also an urgent need for community faith leaders to:

- Identify unused church-owned land and buildings for potential emergency and short-term shelters, transitional housing, permanent supported housing, and affordable housing;
 - Join with the social service sector and local officials to advocate for housing and homelessness solutions on the state and federal level;
 - Recruit volunteers from the various faith communities to assist in these advocacy efforts;
 - Assist social service agencies to connect their clients with basic needs for shelter, food, personal hygiene, and clean clothing; and,
 - Make a concerted effort to explain the spiritual obligations of their congregants to help shelter those who are homeless, feed the hungry, tend to the sick, give financial and material support to those in need, and encourage the discouraged.
5. Many **city residents** who are secure in their own food, housing and material needs have stepped forward as volunteers in their churches, civic associations, and clubs to bring relief to those in need. We urge all city residents to view and approach those who are experiencing homelessness with compassion, understanding, sensitivity, assistance and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The information provided in this report presents a grim picture of life for more than half our city's residents, as they live a daily struggle to find or keep housing for themselves and their children. Too many have lost that fight and now face the tragic uncertainties of life on the street and the battle for survival.

For the great majority of people who are homeless, their situations are the result of circumstances beyond their control. The costs of housing, food, utilities, and other basic life necessities continue to rise, while too many strive to cope with stagnant wages, family dysfunction, inadequate education, addiction, mental and physical health issues, racism, and poverty. Federal, state and local government's repeated failures to remove obstacles to the construction of new affordable housing leaves these desperate people with few, if any, options.

The cost and impact of homelessness and a lack of affordable housing on our community cannot be over-stated. The growing number of individuals and families experiencing chronic housing stress or homelessness is putting an overwhelming strain on our human service resources, as well as having a negative effect on local businesses, public safety, economic growth, home values, and the reputation of our city.

More importantly, too many of us have become desensitized to the urgent needs of our fellow residents – our spiritual brothers and sisters – even blaming, judging, ignoring or ostracizing them instead of responding to their needs. With few exceptions, federal, state and local leaders continue to “study the issue” – essentially ‘kicking the can down the road’ until it becomes someone else's problem. Besides being unhelpful and ineffective, this inaction and lack of compassion weakens the social, moral, and economic fabric of our communities.

There is a solution. Across the country, from New Hampshire to Minnesota to Tennessee to Texas to California – and right here in Rhode Island – communities are pulling together and committing their talents, resources, and energy to address this issue. One Midwestern governor summed it up this way, “The rent is too damn high, and we don't have enough damn housing. So our response is simple: ‘Build, baby, build!’” If simplistic, this is the core of the solution, together with providing the support services these people need to get their lives back on track.

As we build, buy or rehab – and decide where and how we do it – we must remember that what we are really building is *community*. To accomplish that will require the dedicated engagement of all levels of government, nonprofit service agencies, the private sector, the faith community, civic organizations, and those who are secure in their own material needs. Cooperation and coordination between these groups are essential to our success.

Is it worth the work? The failure to address this situation will ultimately cause the collapse of our community, as it has in other places – but it doesn't have to end that way. Our concerted efforts to tackle this problem will not only resolve this particular issue, but will also strengthen our community in countless other ways, now and for generations to come. That certainly *is* worth the effort.

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<p>The four boxed profiles in this report reflect factual situations, but identifying details have either been changed or left out to maintain anonymity.</p>
