More of Minnesota’s elderly are becoming homeless

By Tory Cooney
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David Evansen, 68, is homeless, temporarily housed in Catholic Charities’ emergency living program in Mary Hall, St. Paul. (Pioneer Press: Scott Takushi)

The jingle of Christmas bells jarred with the humid August afternoon. But the cheerful sound follows David Evansen wherever he goes.

When the 68-year-old first saw the cluster of bells tied to a wreath in a trash bin earlier this summer, he dove in after them. It wasn’t easy. Evansen is losing feeling in his legs, needs operations on his ankle and a hernia the size of a tennis ball, and can’t get around without a walker.

“But I just thought, I have to have those,” he said. “For thieves, you know.”

The bells, tied onto a yellow backpack slung over Evansen’s walker, warn the veteran if anyone jostles the pack. The bells came too late for his phone, sunglasses, watch, and money, though. They all went missing shortly after he became homeless June 3.

“It’s tough being out here as a senior citizen,” Evansen said. “But something’s going to turn around. I just have to have a little patience.”

Evansen is part of a particularly vulnerable segment of an already vulnerable population: the elderly homeless. And their numbers are growing.

AGING AND HOMELESS

Over the past decade, the number of older homeless people has increased both in St. Paul and across the country.
Part of that increase can be credited to the fact that baby boomers are a large portion of the population, and they are aging. And the recent recession took its toll on many people’s savings and safety nets.

“First-time older homeless has been a trend since 2008,” said Megan Hustings, interim director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. “The country’s talked about how it’s gone through recovery, but the fact remains it’s had a long-term effect.”

In Minnesota, the increase of homeless people older than 55 is similar to that age group’s increase in the general population, according to the Wilder Foundation, which has conducted a statewide one-night count of the homeless every three years since 1991.

Staff at the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul — which provides services during the day and emergency shelter at night — first began noticing the trend eight years ago as the recession began.

“I remember one night, in the winter, we had eight women over 75 who were all here,” said Dorothy Day program manager Wendy Boppert. Each was homeless for the first time.

While homelessness overall is down statewide, the number of Minnesota homeless between ages 55 and 80 is up nearly 45 percent, according to a Wilder Foundation 2015 report.

In 2015, volunteers counted 9,312 homeless adults, youths and children, 843 of whom were older than 55, making them 9 percent of the state’s homeless population.

“This is what happens when they’ve slipped through every social safety net and exhausted every other option they have,” said Catholic Charities research and policy analyst Kate Searls.

THE STORIES

Evansen first experienced homelessness in 2000, shortly after his retirement from the U.S. Postal Service. He had paid off his condo and planned to live there for the rest of his life. But then, he and his wife divorced, and Evansen found himself with nowhere to go.

He surfed between shelters in Minneapolis and St. Paul and lived with his daughter before conflicts with her boyfriend forced him to move out. In 2008, he found a place at a group home where he lived for eight years, but a “personality difference” between him and the landlady ended with his departure earlier this summer, Evansen said.

In general, people become homeless when they’ve exhausted all of their resources, said Patricia McArdle, Catholic Charities’ director of older adult services. The specific causes vary widely from person to person, but include physical and mental health issues, layoffs, divorce, death, foreclosure, eviction, and other factors.

“With our currently limited social safety net … anybody could become homeless. A lot of it doesn’t happen overnight,” Hustings said. “You might have savings, might stay with family. There are a lot of steps that people who are financially secure will go through before they end up on the streets and in the shelters.”

But when the unexpected happens — like a medical emergency or an eviction — it becomes difficult to decide between paying medical bills, making rent, and buying something to eat, Dorothy Day director Gerry Lauer said.

Some people who end up at Dorothy Day haven’t seen their primary care physician for years. Some haven’t gotten a new pair of glasses in a decade and can’t read forms or signs because their vision has deteriorated, Lauer said.

“You’d be amazed how many people we see here who would never have dreamed that this could happen to them because they’re always been able to take care of themselves,” McArdle said. “We have people in
THE TOLL

Evansen joined the Marine Corps in 1965, five months before his 18th birthday. He was honorably discharged after four years of service and a traumatic spinal injury. He was also exposed to Agent Orange and has begun to suffer nerve damage in his legs because of it, Evansen said.

He takes 20 medications four times a day. He needs somewhere to stay for two months of convalescence before his ankle or hernia can be operated on. While he’s eligible for a motorized scooter from the Veterans Administration, he hasn’t been able to get it because he doesn’t have a permanent address.

While he waits for his scooter, Evansen uses a walker with a built-in seat and a foot-operated lever that helps him maneuver over curbs. Other homeless people he’s seen aren’t so lucky. They use crutches, or rudimentary walkers without a place to sit.

The homeless tend to suffer the health problems of someone 10 to 20 years older, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Because Dorothy Day was not designed as a shelter, the 220 who sleep there each night do so on thin mats spread across the floor. Getting up and down can be difficult for the elderly. Showering quickly enough to keep the line moving is also hard. There are only a few outlets for people with electronic medical devices to plug them in or recharge batteries.

Diabetics don’t have refrigerators to store their insulin. There is always a risk medicine will be stolen. Keeping track of precise doses and timing can also be difficult when you’re trying to figure out where to sleep and what to eat, staff said.

Health issues that become more common with age, like dementia, can make finding a way out of homelessness even more difficult. If a person can’t remember the names of family members or friends, tapping into resources that they may already have becomes virtually impossible.

“Complications get worse. … They begin to snowball,” McArdle said. “If you didn’t have a mental health condition before you were homeless, you will afterwards.”

GAPS IN THE SAFETY NET

Baby boomers were “uniquely positioned” for a hard blow to their housing situation when the recession hit, Searls said.

Older people who lost their jobs struggled to find new ones. Those who had already retired or couldn’t work struggled to get by on a fixed income, Boppert said.

“If you were a low-income person about to retire and your landlord loses the building and your family is not in the community or can’t take you in, where are you going to go?” Searls said.

Nearly 30 percent of those who seek shelter at Dorothy Day are 55 years old or older. And half of them are between 60 and 65, which makes them too young to receive full Social Security benefits. Some are also disabled but not severely enough for the Social Security Disability Insurance program, Searls said.

Social Security benefits are rarely enough.

In July, the average Social Security retirement benefit was $1,304 a month. For most elderly beneficiaries, that accounts for more than half of their income, according to the Social Security Administration.
Meanwhile, the average fair-market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the metro area was $813 a month, or 62 percent of the average benefits check, according to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 2017, that number is projected to jump to $862 a month.

“We see a lot of homelessness, a lot of hopelessness, and not a lot of (affordable) housing,” Boppert said.

MOVING FORWARD

The system is too complicated to navigate alone, Evansen said. When he found himself homeless, he didn’t know how to begin climbing out. But things started to turn around when he connected with Marilyn Cooper from Catholic Charities’ Older Adult Services program.

He transitioned from sleeping on the mats at Dorothy Day to a place at Mary Hall Men’s Emergency Shelter a block away. He has two interviews lined up with housing programs and feels optimistic that something will work out.

Until then, Evansen will remain at Mary Hall. He loves the corner that his bed is in, though the bed itself is too short for his lanky frame. To compensate, he tucks his head under a gap in the metal headboard and uses his pillow to support his neck. His feet still stick out over the edge, but he tries to avoid knocking over the clothes draped across his footboard. Evansen puts them there to prevent them from wrinkling.

“They’re all second- and third-hand. Most of them are don’t fit. I have a 32-inch waist, so they’re usually too big,” Evansen said. “But I have a really nice belt I wrap around a few times. It’s okay.”

The shelters themselves are also slated for a big change.

Rising near the Dorothy Day Center is a new Higher Ground St. Paul, a project by Catholic Charities to provide shelter, supportive housing and services. The first of two buildings is expected to open this fall and will boast of an emergency shelter with bunk beds and abundant electrical outlets as well as nearly 200 small, affordable apartments on the upper floors.

The second building will offer health, employment, and housing services as well as an additional 170 units of housing. Work has yet to begin on the second building.

Higher Ground is a step forward in making more affordable housing available, staff says. But even the additional units won’t be enough to help everyone who needs it.

“There’s endless work to do,” McArdle said.