

The Times

Don't turn away from homeless problem

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I just learned that in the next week or two, without spending much time or money, we can each do something to help the nearly 1,000 adults and 300 children who are homeless in Mercer County. Problems like homelessness can look so overwhelming that it seems easier to turn away -- or even blame the victims.

But not everyone can turn away. My friend Tarry Truitt is convinced the small steps each of us take do matter, and she has lived her life convincing others to join her in working for good.

I know she also believes we must push for more government commitment and for support of agencies like the one for which she is a spokeswoman: the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness.

Tarry and her parents, her sister Mandy, and Tarry's husband Bob have committed themselves all of their lives to helping others.

"Volunteering was what you did to help your community," Tarry says. It was what she saw her dad and her late mom do in half a dozen ways.

When Tarry met Bob nearly 25 years ago, both were volunteer paramedics. Bob, a former volunteer firefighter, has run Mercer County's paramedic program and 911 center, and is now deputy emergency management coordinator for Mercer County.

I once asked Tarry why she keeps at me to write more about the curse of homelessness. She quickly said: "We cannot have homeless! It just is not acceptable."

If you have not seen it, you may not understand those words. I have. I've met homeless people, people who couldn't meet rent or mortgage payments because they had lost jobs, or been financially drained by non-covered health emergencies, or unable to integrate into mainstream life after mental illness or returning from military service.

Some were displaced workers with skills no longer needed in a computer-dominated world. Many had no place to leave their kids, or no money for a car and car insurance, making it nearly impossible to get to a job outside their neighborhood. Now the housing foreclosure crisis is adding to the rolls of the homeless.

Here's how Tarry says we can help: On July 7, The Trenton/Mercer Continuum of Care is sponsoring a one-day event called Project Homeless Connect, an event previously held the past two Januarys.

But with the slowed economy affecting contributions, area food pantries and soup kitchens are suffering, and more help is needed, leading to this added summertime event by the Continuum of Care.

It will provide homeless folks with a hot lunch, free haircuts, and useful items such as new clothing and personal care products. But even more important, they'll get to talk to people who can help them with housing referrals and who can introduce them to a range of support services that could eventually change their lives. Tarry says some don't even know these services exist, or how to access them.

All you need to do is pick up a recyclable bag at your local food market; they run about \$1. Put some non-perishable food in it, then drop it off at 3131 Princeton Pike, building 4, suite 113, in Lawrence, where the Mercer Alliance is located in the United Way office.

Or volunteer to pick up and deliver a bunch of those bags your neighbors or friends fill. You can also donate things like new jeans, sneakers, flashlights and batteries, socks, razors, deodorant, sun screen and tissue. To check all that's needed, look at www.merceralliance.org or call the Mercer Alliance at (609) 844-1008.

Get your kids involved, too. And why not make this a church, temple, Scout troop or community project? Join with my friends Tarry, Mandy and Bob, and the amazing Mercer County agency people and volunteers whose dream is not only to make homelessness unacceptable, but non-existent.

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