

Rutland Herald

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Homeless advocates to shed light on crisis

By [Brent Curtis](#) Herald Staff

Homeless advocates are hoping Rutlanders will focus on two points of light in the community tonight.

At two locations in the city, groups of human service agency staff, homeless advocates, homeless veterans and concerned citizens will light candles to illuminate a problem that is only getting worse in Rutland and around the state.

At 5:30 p.m., the Rutland County Housing Coalition is handing out candles to all who want to hold them during a vigil at Depot Park in downtown Rutland.

A half hour later, the Dodge House, which houses homeless veterans at 95 Crescent St. in the city, will hold its own candlelight vigil to bring attention to the plight of homeless veterans and to remember those homeless veterans who have died.

It's not the first time either organization has hosted such a vigil during the holidays but there have been few occasions when the need for people to take notice and action has been greater, local and statewide homeless advocates say.

The Housing Coalition has a caseload of 171 individuals and families who are either homeless, living in motels or in danger of losing the housing they have.

"That's a lot," said Pat Loughan, executive director of the Housing Coalition. "A lot of people probably have had no idea why we stood in the (North Main Street Park) in the past holding candles. This year, we're not going it alone because we need to make a statement that we have a situation here. We don't want to be depressing, but we do have a crisis."

In the past, the nonprofit organization's vigils have attracted little more than a dozen candle-holders at a time — mostly staff and clients of the Housing Coalition itself. This year, Loughan said he's called on other human agency providers including BROCC, the Salvation Army, state social welfare officials, Neighborworks of Rutland County, city officials and local churches to stand with him to make a statement.

"We can't be the lone rangers anymore," he said.

Loughan's concerns about the rising number of homeless in Rutland are shared by Sharon Russell, executive director of the Open Door Mission on Park Street.

After being at or near capacity for the entire year, Russell said the demand for shelter at the Mission has compelled her to exceed the 40-bed limit for the facility.

"We're eight people over the legal limit right now," she said Thursday. "I don't know what the hell is going on. I would say the numbers have gone up at least 25 percent this year."

Why?

"The economy, the economy, the economy and we have more veterans coming home who are damaged goods," said Russell, whose shelter is home to 37 veterans at the moment.

Russell said she will be lighting a candle at the Dodge House vigil tonight.

Earlier this month, officials at the Committee on Temporary Shelter said housing costs and fuel costs and a tight economy were the main drivers behind an increase in the number of households in need of emergency housing this year. Between 2006 and 2007, officials at COTS, which serves those in need of shelter in Chittenden County, reported more than a 100 percent increase in emergency housing requests which rose from 370 to 774.

What will ease the problem?

In Loughan's opinion, the state needs to spend more money on paying back rent for people faced with losing their homes instead of devoting the bulk of funds to paying for emergency motel stays, which he said are disruptive to families and more expensive than keeping people in their homes.

"If people are touched by what they see, they need to call their legislators and tell them to make affordable housing a priority," he said.

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