

# The Capital

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published July 11, 2010

## ‘Right now, we’re just stuck’

County homeless camps are a symbol of rising problem, advocates say

By ALLISON BOURG, Staff Writer

Becoming homeless happened quickly for Ed. Getting back on his feet has taken much longer.

"I was working for a guy under the table, then he ran short on work," said the 55-year-old, who did not want to give his last name. "It doesn't take long when you're trying to pay rent."

Ed is one of about 15 men and women living in a makeshift camp in the woods of Glen Burnie. He has been there since the spring, when the Arundel House of Hope's annual Winter Relief program for homeless people ended.

Ed found the camp, spread out over about 30 acres in a heavily wooded area, through word of mouth. He lives in a large tent set up beneath a cluster of trees, which provided little respite from the recent steamy, 100-degree heat.

"You can't sleep. Every time the sun goes down, the wind stops if there is any," he said.

Leo Zerhusen, founder of the Glen Burnie nonprofit organization He Opens Pathways For Everyone, or HOPE, said the camp is a symptom of a growing problem. More county residents are struggling than ever before, he said, the victims of a lagging economy and the rising cost of living.

Some, like Ed and the others who live at the camp, have already been pushed over the edge.

And their camp isn't the only one of its kind in the county, said Zerhusen, who knows of at least two others like it in north county.

"It's not going away," he said.

In Annapolis, less than half a mile from the State House and Governor's Mansion, a colony of homeless people live under the College Creek Bridge on Rowe Boulevard. On Friday, no one was there when a reporter and photographer visited, but clothing, chairs and drying laundry showed the site to be home to at least two groups of people.

Figures provided by the county Department of Social Services show that homelessness is indeed on the rise. In 2009, the department recorded more than 1,000 homeless adults, compared with 550 two years earlier. The number of homeless children jumped from 429 in 2007 to 960 last year, figures show.

"We are seeing an increase, mostly in the area of homeless adults, because people are losing their jobs and their homes," said Marci Kennai, county director of social services.

### Long waiting list

At the Light House shelter on West Street in Annapolis, family caseworker Amy Ryan said demands on homeless programs are growing by leaps and bounds.

The shelter has beds for 20 men and eight women, and two emergency apartments for families.

"We have a huge waiting list, especially for families," Ryan said.

When asked why demand is so high, Ryan's answer was simple: "The economy. Job loss. The cost of housing in Anne Arundel County. People just can't work \$8 and \$10 jobs and find a place to live."

Elizabeth Kinney, president of the shelter's board, said that 55 percent of the shelter's clients come from the county, and 45 percent from Annapolis. Fifty percent of the adult males are military veterans.

The Light House will open a new and much larger shelter on Hudson Street this fall, but even that facility will not be enough.

"There is a four-year waiting list to get people into (Annapolis) public housing," Kinney said.



Photos by Shannon Lee Zirkle and Paul W. Gillespie — The Capital

TOP: Brianna Boyd, 19, and her 10-week-old son, Braden, are the face of homelessness in Anne Arundel County. They are living at the Light House shelter in Annapolis until Boyd can find a job for herself and day care for her son.

MIDDLE: A makeshift camp under the College Creek Bridge on Rowe Boulevard is home for some homeless people, who were away when a reporter and photographer visited the site. Camps such as this are common around Anne Arundel County and in Annapolis, where homeless shelter workers say there is a four-year waiting list to get people into public housing.

BOTTOM: Leslie and Jack are a homeless couple who live in one of a handful of makeshift camps in the wooded areas of Glen Burnie. Jack is a veteran and a former iron worker who was injured on the job. They are looking for a way to get back to his native state of Alaska, but have trouble just surviving day to day.

One Light House resident, Brianna Nicole Boyd, 19, described how she became homeless.

Boyd, who lived in Pasadena and who has lived in Howard County, dropped out of high school at 15 to take care of her sick mother and grandmother. Then, last year, she was working in telemarketing, making as much as \$11 an hour, and living with her boyfriend.

She became pregnant and, during the last few weeks of the pregnancy, was unable to work.

Her boyfriend kicked her out and doesn't return her calls.

Now, Boyd and her 10-week-old son, Braden Alexander Boyd, are living at the shelter.

Boyd said she is in the process of getting her GED, and she wants to become a nurse.

For now, though, any kind of work will do, as long as it's enough for her to find a place to live and to pay for someone to take care of Braden.

"I didn't have any place to go," she said of her situation. "I am just really, really grateful to be here."

### Different stories

The people who live in the Glen Burnie woods have had no choice but to turn the area into their home.

Upon first glance, it looks like any weekend camp site. Tents are set up in the shadiest areas - prime real estate, Ed said - and empty food and alcohol containers sit on the ground beside each. Many of the sites are meticulously kept, with leaves swept away from the sleeping areas into neat piles.

But look a little closer, and it's clear that the people inside the tents are full-time residents, not avid campers.

A clock hangs from a clothesline strung between two trees. Knickknacks and other personal belongings sit among piles of clothes. Zerhusen said he's working on getting some picnic tables for the camp so its residents have another place to sit.

"We're just making it the best we can," one 51-year-old man named Dennis said.

He has been at the camp since March. Before that, he stayed with family members or rented rooms, but his money ran out.

"I've never really had my own place," he said.

Dennis said he has relied on disability checks to make ends meet since he was in a car accident in the 1980s.

"I can't sit on my legs for 40 hours a week," he said, which makes it difficult for him to hold a job.

Still, he said he hopes to be out of the camp within a few months, possibly living with his girlfriend. He admits that many homeless shelters won't take him because he drinks.

"And I'm hard to get along with," he admitted.

"That's something you've got to get taken care of," Zerhusen told him during a recent visit to the camp.

Dennis nodded.

"I'm 51. I know I need help. I just need to be sick and tired of being sick and tired," he said. "I know what I need to do. It's just a matter of doing it."

Most of those who live at the camp are without jobs, and each has a different story to tell about how they became jobless and homeless.

One 40-year-old man, who has been at the camp for about four months, served time for armed robbery, which turns off potential employers, he said. One married couple tried to move to Alaska for a fresh start, but had to return home to Maryland because of a family emergency.

They can no longer afford the cost of living in Anne Arundel County and are on a long waiting list for public housing.

Both are out of work, and find themselves in a frustrating Catch-22: They can't afford housing without jobs, but it's nearly impossible to get work without a permanent address or transportation, they said.

"Right now, we're just stuck," the woman said.

Justin Mulcahy, a spokesman for county police, said authorities are aware of the Glen Burnie camp.

"There have been no issues associated with the camp regarding criminal activity. Officers are prepared to enforce any criminal activity such as panhandling and public drinking, and will also investigate any complaints received," Mulcahy said.

The police are in no way targeting homeless people, Mulcahy said.

"Our department often makes contact with individuals who may be in crisis or need assistance, and we make them aware of any resources available to them such as the mobile crisis team," he said.

"Furthermore, our bike patrol is designed to make personal contact with members of the community such as the homeless and offer assistance in any way possible."

### **Growing need**

Zerhusen founded HOPE in 2004 after a mission trip to part of Appalachia. The Christian-based charity helps needy families all over the county, as well as in Baltimore and a few communities in West Virginia.

Since then, the nonprofit organization has moved about five times, always seeking more storage space. The need just continues to grow, said Zerhusen, standing in one of HOPE's two Glen Burnie warehouses. The warehouses measure about 5,000 square feet and are packed full of donated clothes, furniture and toys. Still, "we've outgrown them," he said.

HOPE needs about double that space, Zerhusen said. Volunteers have already emptied the warehouses twice this year.

Last year, the charity helped 83 families. This year, volunteers have assisted nearly 100 - and the year's only half over.

"A lot of what's happening is because of the economy," Zerhusen said.

Other charities are experiencing the same crushing need.

The Rev. Ed Jansen, director of the Emmaus Center in Glen Burnie, said he is "absolutely swamped" with people in need. The center, which he opened with his wife in 2008, serves breakfast and lunch to homeless people and also provides counseling services. Jansen estimates that he serves about 1,200 meals a month.

"We're adequately serving our people, but we're just overwhelmed by the need," Jansen said.

But he was hesitant to blame it all on the economy.

"People could just be becoming more aware of us," Jansen said. "I have a suspicion that it's a combination of both."

Zerhusen said his greatest hope is for a public forum - possibly through the county-owned TV station - that would allow him to get the word out to the county's residents about the need for assistance.

"Let us tell people how they can help," he said.

---

Staff Writer Earl Kelly contributed to this article

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series on the continuing impact of the economy on poor and working families in Anne Arundel County. Coming tomorrow: One step away from homelessness.