

An In-depth Look at Homelessness on the Route 1 Corridor in Mount Vernon and Lee

By MARY PADEN
Contributing Writer

Editor's note: This is the first of a four part series on homelessness along the Rte.1 corridor in Mount Vernon and Lee Districts. Part I introduces several homeless people living along Rte.1. In Part II these people speak out about their experiences and offer insights on how homeless people can be helped. Part III describes the nearly 40-year history of attempts to address homelessness along the corridor. Part IV assesses progress on Fairfax County's 2008 10-year plan to end homelessness, including the 100,000 Homes campaign.

Most people don't notice the 50-60 homeless people who live along Rte. 1 between Huntington and the South County Center. "People want us to be invisible," said Carol Murphy an outspoken 55-year-old who is homeless. "They want us to go away. They don't want to think about us. But we are here — and we are like you."

Murphy said she "got to be homeless because when I was general manager for the Southern Motel, I was attacked by a drunk guest, who smashed a full bottle of Tropicana orange juice on my head and gave me an eight-inch skull fracture and traumatic brain injury." She said she was also bipolar and a cancer survivor.

Murphy said she had a room at the motel as part of her job, but when she was injured and could not work, she lost the job and the room.

Kimberly MacNamara, a paralegal who came within one course of Bachelor's degree in her native California, and who has been homeless since November, noted that many people are one paycheck or one illness away from homelessness.

An articulate soft-spoken 50-year old, MacNamara is another example of someone who slipped into homelessness because a health problem led to a job loss, which led to loss of a shared apartment. She said her life working as a paralegal for a Fairfax City attorney and living with a family changed suddenly when she started fainting, a situation that led to a broken leg and diagnoses of several chronic illnesses that kept her out of work for a couple months and led to the loss of her job.

She said she stayed with a friend for a few weeks, then spent some nights at Reagan National Air-

port while seeking a bed at a county shelter. She got in at the county's Eleanor U. Kennedy Shelter on Rte. 1 at Fort Belvoir, but her broken leg prevented the climb into her assigned top bunk. So she slept on the floor for a couple weeks. Shortly after a lower bunk opened up, she said was evicted because her unemployment kicked in and her case worker told her to find another place. She got back into the Kennedy hypothermia unit, which has a policy of turning no one away from December through March.

Panhandling at the mall

At Beacon Mall on a cold day in late January, Steven Yokel was quietly panhandling. Yokel appeared able-bodied, polite, and respectful. He said he had a job as a glazier — a glass installer and cutter — for six years but lost it in June 2014. Around that time the old farmhouse, where he lived with several others, was condemned. He lived in his car until it died and was eventually towed from a parking lot.

"I try to get enough money each day to eat and have bus fare and some cigarettes," he said. I usually stay at Rising Hope [United Methodist Mission Church Hypothermia Center on Russell Road]. You can line up at the door at 6 p.m. and they let people in at 7 p.m. They take the first 24 people [the limit set by the Fairfax County Fire Marshall]: last night I barely made it in. The rest have to find someplace else."

The Kennedy Shelter is about four miles south of Rising Hope. If a homeless person doesn't have bus fare, or if Rising Hope is out of bus tokens, he or she has to walk — or find a couch somewhere. If they do get to Kennedy, and have no money, they have to walk back to the area of Rte. 1 where they can find food and county services.

Matter-of-factly, Yokel described his daily routine: "I leave the shelter at 7 a.m. and go to the South County job center at 8 a.m. where I use the computers to look for work. It is hard to apply for a job when you are homeless because you don't have an address or phone number. It is also hard to get to job interviews or to jobs without a car.

"At noon I go to the Elks Lodge for lunch, then I go somewhere and panhandle to get some money. I get dinner at Rising Hope if I can get in."

Yokel has a girlfriend of three years, who is also homeless. He

proudly showed a photo of their one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Jasmine Marie, who lives with her grandparents in Dale City.

Economics of homelessness

Murphy, a member of Rising Hope Church, stays there in the winter and in the summer lives in her 1997 Subaru Legacy that currently needs a water pump and a timing belt. She said the tags expire March 31 and she didn't know if she could get it fixed to pass inspection by then. The car, stuffed with her belongings, is in the church parking lot.



Homeless on The Corridor Part I

Murphy lives on a monthly Social Security Disability check of \$741. MacNamara currently lives on her unemployment of \$300 a week.

Websites of the many garden apartments along Rte. 1 show rents of about \$1,000 a month for a rare studio, and about \$1,300 for a one-bedroom. A room in a house or apartment is about \$600 on Craig's List. Then there is the problem of landlord credit checks and employment information.

Homeless by experiment

Crain Thomson is a mainstay at Rising Hope Church. He said that for a while he was homeless "by experiment," and is now a trustee at the church and a seer of its homeless clients.

"Three years ago I decided to try living on the streets to see what it was like. My grandpa was a hobo in the 20s and 30s and I was curious about the life. I set up a shelter in the woods and got comfortable and started meeting the guys. When it got cold, I went to Walmart and picked out a good Coleman sleeping bag rated to 0 but it was \$49 — all the money I

had. I was trying to bargain with the salesman when a guy came along and said he would pay for it. I protested, but he insisted and said, 'I just want you to do one thing: come to Rising Hope on Sunday.' The guy was the chair of the church council, and I have been at the church ever since."

Thomson said he now stays at the Audubon mobile home park with friends and does odd jobs like loading building supplies for contractors and seasonal work. But most of the time he is a go-to guy at the hypothermia center: instantly recognizable by his chest-full of buttons promoting Rising Hope, his wiry outdoorsy frame, and camouflage camp hat.

Thomson estimated there were 50-60 homeless people along Rte. 1 and thought the number was growing. The previous night, homeless people across the country had filled out forms for the 2015 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development "point-in-time count" that includes those in shelters, in time-limited transitional housing programs, or unsheltered and living on the street. The 2014 count recorded 1,225 homeless people in the Fairfax-Falls Church area, 125 fewer than in 2013, but did not break down the number by district, and they are not evenly distributed. The 2015 should be available soon.

Coming in from the cold

Asked if Rte. 1's homeless people all found shelter on cold nights, Thomson said, "Most people get inside, but some stay on street corners if they are too inebriated. Most people make plans before winter. There are three winter campsites in the woods right now: one has a propane heater." If they don't get into Rising Hope, Thomson said, "we see them again—usually earlier—the next night. Last night there was huge line and we let them in early.

"We have four tables where they eat and watch TV. A sliding wall separates that area from the sleeping room where they sleep on mats in sleeping bags. There is a free clothing store downstairs and we refer them to services. They have to leave at 7 a.m. They get coffee and some breakfast and a bag lunch. Then we clean the place up and reopen at 9:30 with coffee and prayers at noon and lunch at 12:30. They can hang around all day."

The hypothermia shelter is hosted by Rising Hope but it is

run by New Hope Housing, a nonprofit organization begun in 1977 to address homelessness along Rte. 1, along with Ventures in Community — a coalition of churches and agencies along Rte. 1. The shelter, officially called Ventures in Community — Hypothermia Outreach Program (VIC-HOP), opened in 2006. VIC churches each take a night of the week when their volunteers cook dinner, supervise the overnight clients, and provide a light breakfast. This year the shelter is served by 16 area churches, some of which reliably cover a night a week for 4 months while others cover a few nights during the winter. New Hope Housing also manages the Kennedy Shelter, a converted building on Fort Belvoir, for the county.

One thing that the Rising Hope shelter lacks is showers. The Kennedy Shelter, which has a capacity of 50 plus 25 in overflow, has only two working showers for men and two for women, according to people who have stayed there. Neither facility has a laundry. For showers and laundry, homeless people gravitate to the local nonprofit People Receiving Services (PRS) day center in Saratoga Shopping Center, or the Gartlan Center on Holland Ave, near Inova Mount Vernon Hospital, both of which offer clinical mental health services.

From hard luck to lost hope

The homeless "range from hard luck to lost hope," Thomson said. Some work as day laborers, getting in line at 5 a.m. at one of the two temporary agencies for day labor construction workers: Labor Ready and Labor Finders. Others are addicted or suffer from mental illness.

"Alcoholism is hard on guys on the street, they are desperate. It makes the world go away for a while," Thomson said. "A few hear voices. One guy here says he has a 'lady in his head' who speaks to him. Some have Tourette syndrome — they just blurt things out. Some need help with their meds.

"Danger is rare," Thomson said. "It is usually drug or alcohol related. A couple weeks ago a guy got high on PCP and walked out into Rte. 1 and was killed by traffic. Some of the guys here knew him.

"There are little crosses all up and down Rte. 1 — a lot of them for pedestrians."

Next week: Part II Rte. 1's Homeless People Speak Out.



All her belongings are stuffed into Carol Murphy's 1997 Subaru, where she also sleeps in the summer.



Steven Yokel proudly shows a photo of his young daughter, Jasmine Marie, as he panhandles at Beacon Mall.



Deborah "Tibbs" Carter offers bag lunches to clients at the Rising Hope hypothermia shelter.



Homeless people gather at Rising Hope for lunch on a cold January day.

Photos/Mary Paden



Crain Thomson finds a warm coat for a client at the Rising Hope clothing shop.



The Eleanor U. Kennedy Shelter houses 38 men and 12 women in a renovated building at Fort Belvoir.



Workmen repair a trailer that shelters overflow clients from the Eleanor U. Kennedy Shelter.