

Danville News Column
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"Reframing: The Ill-Housed"
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Word Count: 750

There's a young man I know with two roommates who rents an apartment in town. With the snow thick on his roof, buckets of water leak down through the ceiling, even dribbling through the light fixtures. The young man tried many times to persuade the landlord to correct the problem. The landlord is a good guy, but he himself isn't in a position to replace the roof. The young man pondered his options. He didn't want to officially complain about the landlord. Why? If they report, it is likely they will shut down the apartment. Then they're stuck worse. They cannot afford to relocate. Despite the young man working three part-time jobs, he lacks the fiscal resources to stake another place. Here's an annoying sidebar: where this young man use to work closed. He applied for unemployment compensation, but his other two jobs put him over the top. He recently discovered three of his former co-workers are collecting benefits, plus receiving medical coverage. They receive more money than he makes working three jobs. What incentive is that? It's a mess.

Reframing. The word means 'to present a new way of thinking about something.'

I present this young man's predicament to reframe our perception of the homeless. In our rustic region we may never see the bag lady living in a cardboard carton on the street corner, but we do have our hidden homeless. I prefer to name them 'ill-housed.' Given meager work and financial strains, more of our neighbors struggle to allocate thinning resources for shelter. Instead of the drooling drunk, think instead of families. 2/3rds of homeless are families. At a recent Homeless Task Force meeting hosted by Columbia County, it was reported that up where the Marcellus Shale Gas is going gangbusters, so is the increase in foster-care demands. Landlords evict tenants to jack up the rent threefold, taking advantage of the well paid roughnecks moving into the area. It may be legal, but I pronounce this a sin. Since mom and dad want their children to stay in the same school, they put them in foster-care while they rent a pop-up camper and survive in some campground. Homeless? Think instead of the young woman with two children whose grandmother cannot cope with them in her trailer, so woman and children move in with a girlfriend in a one bedroom apartment where bad things happen because of the girlfriend's boyfriend.

Note: about 30% of Danville School students receive subsidized lunches.

The other day we put call forwarding on the Gate House phone number, our county's transitional housing and care center. The calls now get routed into my church office. Here's a sampling of persons in need of shelter: call from Geisinger's Emergency Department needing a place for a fellow on Medical Assistance with no place to which to be discharged; call from a mother trying to find a place for her son's girlfriend whose two children are cared for by grandma while she waits for child support and finishes treatments; call from AGAPE in Bloomsburg needing a place for a young man kicked out violently by his uncle; call from Beyond Violence in Berwick looking to relocate a woman and her four children as she's used up her 60 days there; call from Geisinger's psychiatric ward looking to place a 46 year old alcoholic male who had been previously evicted from the Gate House; call from Columbia Human Services for a fellow who's losing his job and can't keep up with rent or child support; call from CMSU needing a placement for a person with special needs; call from a woman pleading "can I come to your shelter." Then there was the indigent woman who walked into the office, her husband out in the car, hoping we could put them up for the night.

This is a week's worth of calls. It's becoming obvious the problem requires a 'roll-up-the-sleeves' discussion about the type of facilities needed. One shelter isn't adequate. Likely Columbia County needs a Nightly Hostel modeled on what the American Rescue Workers offer in Williamsport. We need large Half-way Houses for clients with emotional problems or addictions

(I'm a fan of work camps). We need Transitional Housing for singles and families who simply need time to recoup and recover. Another idea on the table could be a 'Room-to-Let Bank' where spare bedrooms can be used by adequately screened persons. Of course, prevention is best. Efforts to protect persons from losing their homes make the most sense.