

## Supporting Organizations

- Affirmative Options
- Children's Law Center of Minnesota
- Family & Children's Services
- Hmong American Partnership
- Legal Services Advocacy Project
- Lutheran Social Services
- Mental Health Association of MN
- Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health
- Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless
- Minnesota Council of Child Caring Agencies
- Minnesota Organization for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention
- Minnesota Psychology Association
- Minnesota Society for Clinical Social Work
- National Alliance on Mental Illness – MN
- National Association of Social Workers – MN
- State Advisory Council on Mental Health
- The Bridge for Youth
- District 202
- Evergreen House
- Freeport West
- Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota
- Minneapolis Public Schools
- Minnesota Youth Policy Alliance
- Youthlink
- Pillsbury United Communities
- Kulture Klub Collaborative
- Minnesota Youth Intervention Programs Association
- Catholic Charities-Office of Social Justice
- Outfront Minnesota
- The Depot Coffee House
- MN School Social Workers Association
- Avenues for Youth
- Rainbow Families
- Office for Justice
- Metro-wide Engagement on Shelter and Housing
- Minneapolis/ Hennepin County Commission to End Homelessness
- Minnesota Youth Service Association
- The Link
- Asian Media Access
- YMCA Point Northwest Teens Alone

# Youth Moving Forward:

*Working together to Ensure Stability, Opportunity, and Connection*

## Homeless Youth and the Surrounding Communities

A recently-published *Star Tribune* letter to the editor, *They Don't Need Pity, They Need Change*, shows the impact of homelessness upon many different areas of the community. Monica Nilsson, Director of Street Outreach for St. Stephen's Human Services describes the impact: "In some cases -- the stories of the 43 people we placed in housing since our program's beginning -- we can make it work. In others, we need the will of our community backing us."

Monica's brother, Steven Nilsson, Vice President of NAI Welsch Companies discusses how homelessness impacts the business community: "You can imagine the challenge in trying to conduct a site visit with a potential buyer and having someone -- or more than one someone -- laid out in the entry of the building."

Mr. Nilsson ends the article with a compelling statement, showing how homelessness is a universal community issue: "Homelessness is hurting my agenda. I can only hope that my sister's agenda is met, not only for her clients' benefit but for me and our community. The reality is that the problems won't go away because we decide there's no money to address them; we will all have to live with them surrounding us unaddressed."

*(See the entire text of the article on the back of the page.)*

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## **They don't need pity. They need a change**

**Among the reasons to fight homelessness are these: 1) It's bad for business, and 2) People who sleep on the street are in need -- and they are our neighbors. A brother and sister, coming at the issue with different perspectives but a common goal, tell their story.**

**By Steven T. Nilsson, Vice President, NAI Welsh Companies and Monica Nilsson, Director of Street Outreach, St. Stephen's Human Services**

Welsh Companies has a commercial property for sale in an ideal setting. It stands in the shadow of the new Twins stadium, with outstanding accessibility to downtown Minneapolis and the freeway system. The buildings are available for occupancy today.

The problem is that the only people who have taken advantage of the property's convenient location, downtown views and immediate availability are homeless. Both of us wish they weren't there.

In the fight against homelessness, both of us want to win -- but for different reasons. You can imagine the challenge in trying to conduct a site visit with a potential buyer and having someone -- or more than one someone -- laid out in the entry of the building. Yes, the police could be called, over and over, but we have a brother who's a cop, and his time is valuable. Moreover, ticketing a homeless person only makes it harder to find housing for that person later on.

But what are the options for a businessman who needs a presentable site to offer buyers? Until recently, there weren't any. Ironically, the solution came from sister to brother.

With support from the state Department of Public Safety and the city of Minneapolis, Monica became director of Street Outreach for St. Stephen's Human Services and is charged with decreasing street homelessness, panhandling and police time spent on homelessness.

Monica: In St. Stephen's new Street Outreach program, modeled on efforts in Philadelphia and New York City, our team works to house people sleeping outside and address community livability issues. We also try to educate the public and policymakers about what it will take to end homelessness.

Somehow, in the 30 years since people began arriving en masse at church shelters and county agencies, we've gone from believing that homelessness can't last to believing that homelessness won't end. The solutions we've tried over three decades have not worked. Opening shelters, soup kitchens, giving to panhandlers -- these were supposed to be temporary remedies, not an institutionalized policy on how to help our poorest neighbors. And how do those neighbors live?

Greg has been sleeping in a porta-potty in a metro park. Karen, pregnant, was sleeping in her car with her two kids in a "rich" neighborhood outside Minneapolis because she felt safer near big houses. A counselor at the local college called to say he found out one of his students was sleeping each night in a chair, sitting up. Mary, a mother from an affluent suburb, lives in her car while her mental illness goes untreated. Then there are the guys near my brother's buildings -- the panhandlers and town drunks. For each of these folks, this was their housing in winter. In Minnesota.

One of the panhandlers is John. John has grown obese on the food that people hand him on the corner each day. I know the gesture comes from the goodness of the hearts of passersby, but John is still homeless. And sandwiches and cans of pop don't help the open sores on his battered body where maggots have taken up residence. Mary, another panhandler, was successful because she was pregnant. Unfortunately, well-meaning people handed her enough money to keep her heroin addiction alive through her pregnancy.

My brother understands that finding housing for people whose income ranges from \$0 to \$700 a month is an almost impossible math to make work. There are two options: increased income or a rent subsidy. In some cases -- the stories of the 43 people we placed in housing since our program's beginning -- we can make it work. In others, we need the will of our community backing us. But, like so many social services in these tough economic times, programs for the homeless are about to go under the axe. Unfortunately, the recession is only increasing the number of people without homes. I want my brother to do well in his work. I also need his help, as I need the help of every person who feels discomfort, shame, anger or especially the impulse to help when they see a panhandler or other homeless person.

We also need a few minutes of your time: Call your elected officials and ask them to preserve funding for the poorest among us. One might hope that they will just die or go away. The reality is the situation will only be more expensive when unaddressed.

People do not choose to be homeless. St. Stephen's, and every other social service agency, get calls all day long from individuals and families asking for help coming in from the cold. If those of us with jobs and homes are hurting and scared, imagine what an economic downturn means for someone with little or nothing. We need financial support for our programs. Not change tossed to people in pity, but real change in our community. Change that says seeing people live like this is intolerable.

As we worked with men and women sleeping in the back of parked tractor trailers, they spoke of being afraid each night that someone would set fire inside the doors and lock them in. We have people not only coming out of the woodwork; they want to come out of the woods, literally -- and few places like the smell of bonfire on your clothes when you're interviewing for an apartment. So we work to meet their most basic needs and then prepare people for housing if the money works.

Kevin came to us after a week at a big shelter downtown. "I can't stay there, it's too scary," he reported. I asked where he was before that. "Stillwater prison. They drove me to the shelter when I got out."

The veterans sleeping outside tell me that the warrior ethos demands no soldier be left behind. We find joy each week when we can say that one is now thawing out in his new apartment.

It's a bit different for the homeless youth we encounter. Having recently opened a Safety Center on Block E with the Minneapolis Police Department, we know that youth can use their age or beauty to get a place to sleep. Youthlink, a center two blocks from my brother's buildings, recently started a food shelf. The purpose isn't solely to feed; it's to serve as an alternative form of payment for shelter.

