

A stand to end homelessness

It hardly seems possible that just a month ago I was writing about repelling with us from the Brady-Sullivan Tower to support the work of numerous nonprofits in our community. That event – LIVE UNITED Over the Edge – took place two weeks ago, and raised more than \$181,000 for 24 different nonprofits, an increase of more than 25 percent from last year. We did it with the support of almost 2,200 individual donors. I could not be prouder of our community and this tremendous outpouring of support for causes as diverse as Girls Inc., Revive Recovery, Grow Nashua, the Greater Nashua Dental Connection, Habitat for Humanity and many others. Our belief at United Way is that this type of collective, collaborative effort is what is needed to truly transform the way we approach lasting community impact. We already are looking forward to next summer when we will attempt to take this event to even greater heights (metaphorically speaking, of course). On a personal note, a huge shout out to the 62 donors who helped me to exceed my goal of raising \$6,000 to help end youth homelessness in our community. That is the subject that brings me to our next event and the topic for today's column: United We Sleep to End Hunger and Homelessness 2018.

On Sept. 21-22, we will be gathering for the third year in a row to bring awareness and raise funds to end homelessness in our community. The goals for the event are twofold. First, it is a fundraiser. The money we raise – \$140,000 over the past two years – is invested back into the community through United Way's unique "community assessment and investment" process. This process, driven by data that describes the true needs of our community, points us in the direction of programs to support that ultimately help permanently break the cycle of poverty. It seems simple, but the ultimate reason why people are homeless is that they cannot afford housing, and by breaking that cycle, we give people the tools



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and wherewithal to become self-sufficient. Sometimes, people ask me if the money we raise goes to homeless shelters and soup kitchens. While these are very important institutions, most of our investment is placed instead in those programs that enable people to be lifted out of poverty – as often is stated, these are hand-ups, not hand-outs. The data shows that if people have access to health care, child care, dental care, transitional housing, hospice care, etc., that they will be much more likely to become self-sustaining in the long run.

So, as a fundraiser, the way the event works is that people sign up to participate and then ask their friends, family, colleagues and companies to support them. Everyone has a fundraising goal that they try to meet or exceed. This year, we are broadening the effort by adding teams to the event. A team is three or more individuals who might be from a company, organization, church, service club, etc. The team also has a fundraising goal that they work toward, and all the money that they raise goes toward United Way's Community Impact network of programs.

This brings me to our second purpose for United We Sleep, and frankly, the more important one: education and awareness. Over the past two years, approximately 140 people have participated. They spend an intensive evening learning from real-life people and experts from the community in topics such as mental health, housing, economics of poverty and programs which provide pathways out of homelessness. The programs this year are being run by an outstanding panel of experts that will include representatives from Habitat for Humanity and Neighborhoods Southern New Hampshire discussing affordability of housing, City Welfare and United Way running an "economics of poverty" simulation, Child and Family Services and Harbor Homes facilitating a conversation about youth homelessness, human trafficking, and vulnerability and finally Public Health and Greater Nashua Mental Health discussing the physical and mental health effects of and on homelessness. As you can see, this is a robust conversation and a great opportunity to "dig deeply" into

topics that ordinary residents don't otherwise have the chance to discuss with such experts. I'm also often asked whether the event is open to youth, and my answer is that if they are old enough to be involved with these discussion, that youth are just fine to take part. However, we make no attempt at softening the topic for younger ears.

After an evening of programming and what can only be described as a very spartan meal, each participant gets their box and we set up for the night. Participants are only allowed to bring a sleeping bag, a tooth brush and the clothes they are wearing. Bathrooms? Not really – we all share a single port-a-John. And in the morning, after an uncomfortable night of restless slumber, we have coffee, PB&J and debrief on moments of insight and clarity as well as discussing what concrete steps we can take based on what we have learned.

I often tell people that nobody comes away from this event thinking they know what it is like to be homeless. However, everybody comes away with a deeper understanding of the causes, issues and potential solutions, and they learn in a very profound way through a personal experience what they can do to make a difference. If this appeals to you, then consider this an open invite to join us, as an individual or as a team for "United We Sleep 2018." It's easy to learn more and get started. The best way is simply online at the event site, which is <https://app.mobile-cause.com/vf/sleepout2018>. You also could find more information on our Web page under "events" or on our Facebook page. By the way, if you participated last year or the year before, please join us again and this time be sure to bring a friend.

We are excited about this fall's sleepout, which will again take place prominently on Amherst Street in front of our partner, Nashua Community College. We look forward to seeing many, many of you there and truly appreciate how this might be a great chance for each of us to demonstrate as individuals how Great Things Happen when we LIVE UNITED.

Mike Apfelberg is president of United Way of Greater Nashua.