

THE BUFFALO NEWS

'A Slow, Steady Rise': The Problem of Homelessness Is Worsening, And Solutions Remain Elusive



A man closes up his tent under skyway on Lower Terrace on Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2025. Joed Viera/Buffalo News

Jesse Vaccaro is facing his fourth or fifth winter of being homeless in Buffalo. It is hard to count them all, he said. The years blend together.

As temperatures drop and snow accumulates, his most difficult daily task is finding a place to sleep. In winter, he looks for shelter warm enough to survive the night, protected from hypothermia and from anyone who might want to do him harm.

Sometimes, that means sleeping beneath the overhang of a vacant former drug store on the West Side.

“Because you got a roof, we sleep under there, just in case it rains,” Vaccaro said. “I put out a tarp or a blanket and lay on that.”

Vaccaro said he had been living with grandfather until he was arrested and sent to jail. While he was incarcerated, his grandfather died. When Vaccaro was released, he no longer had a place to go.

“So I ended up out here,” he said, gesturing to the neighborhood around Niagara Street.

Vaccaro’s nightly search for a place to sleep is a personal struggle, but it is not an isolated one. Across Buffalo and Erie County, homelessness is rising, becoming more visible and more complicated, as shelters strain at capacity, encampments reappear after authorities clear them out, and rising rents push people with low or fixed incomes onto the streets. What was once easier to overlook has become

a public issue touching neighborhoods from downtown to the suburbs, forcing city leaders, service providers and residents to confront a tangled problem with no simple solutions.

Advocates in Erie County say the local homeless population has been steadily growing and has become harder to stabilize. Last summer, the Homeless Alliance of Western New York estimated there were about 922 people experiencing homelessness countywide, most of them in Buffalo – an increase of roughly 10% from the year before.

Homelessness on the rise in Buffalo, Erie County

Year	Location	Estimated homeless population
2024	Erie County	857
2024	Buffalo	659
2025	Erie County	922
2025	Buffalo	754

Counting people without stable housing is imprecise, by nature, but service providers say the trend is real. High rents, evictions and a shortage of affordable units have pushed more people into homelessness, while mental illness, substance use, domestic violence and job loss often make it harder for people to regain housing once they fall out of it.

“What we’re seeing isn’t a sudden spike, but a slow, steady rise,” said Kexin Ma, executive director of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York. “Even when people have income or a housing voucher, finding a landlord willing to rent to them has become increasingly difficult.”

Shelters are frequently at or near capacity, and emergency placements in motels or hotels are not always available or practical. As a result, Ma said, more people are left to improvise. That could mean sleeping outdoors, cycling through temporary arrangements or drifting between encampments, even as winter weather becomes more severe and more dangerous.

Impossible to avoid



The camp of Amanda and Howard Johnson, a homeless couple from West Virginia, by the skyway on Lower Terrace on Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2025. Joed Viera/Buffalo News

The rise in homelessness locally mirrors a broader national trend. About 770,000 people in the United States experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2024, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's annual Point-in-Time count – the highest number on record, and an increase of roughly 18% from the year before. HUD officials attributed the growth to rising housing costs, inflation and a shortage of affordable rental units nationwide.

How that trend is playing out in Buffalo is visible to anyone who looks. Homelessness is no longer confined to hidden places. Encampments have taken hold under bridges, along major corridors and in public spaces, where they appear, are eventually cleared out and then reappear at the same location or somewhere else.

Near lower Niagara Street, just past the Peace Bridge, makeshift camps have formed beneath overpasses and behind fencing and shrubbery, visible to motorists and visitors entering the city. Mattresses, tarps, furniture and shopping carts full of belongings have become familiar sights. City crews clear the sites, but mattresses and personal items often return within weeks, authorities said.

Similar patterns have emerged downtown, including at Reading Park outside the Buffalo & Erie County Central Library. Police periodically remove encampments there, only to see people come back, drawn by proximity to services, foot traffic and relative safety.

For some residents and business owners, the growing visibility has become a flashpoint.

“This area is very important for our community and very important for the City of Buffalo because it’s the first impression of our city,” said Casimiro Rodriguez, president of the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York.

The issue extends beyond the city’s core and into the suburbs.

In late August, Orchard Park police responding to reports of a loud explosion discovered multiple homeless camps on vacant land, complete with tents and fire pits. And farther still from the urban core of Buffalo, Jamestown officials declared a state of emergency in 2024 as encampments multiplied rapidly, creating what city leaders described as serious public health and safety concerns.

Downtown business leaders say the strain is increasingly visible. Some businesses have shut off outdoor electrical outlets to prevent people from charging phones and devices. Public fountains are used for bathing. Public spaces double as places to sleep.

“It isn’t a city problem. It isn’t a county problem,” said Steven Carmina, CEO of Carmina Wood Design and a chairman of the Board of Directors of Buffalo Place. “It’s a problem for everyone.”

Law enforcement officials say their authority to effect any sort of lasting change is limited.

“People have a right to be in public spaces if they’re not committing a crime,” said Buffalo Police B-District Chief Tommy Champion. “If they’re just in the park, we can’t tell them to leave.”



Homeless advocate Rena Coker prays over a homeless man on Sunday, Dec. 7, 2025. Joed Viera/Buffalo News

A political problem

As encampments grow more visible and complaints mount, homelessness has become an issue that Buffalo's new mayor said he cannot ignore.

“Having people living in streets and tents or under underpasses – it’s not where we want to be,” Mayor Sean Ryan said. “It’s not compassionate. It’s not safe.”

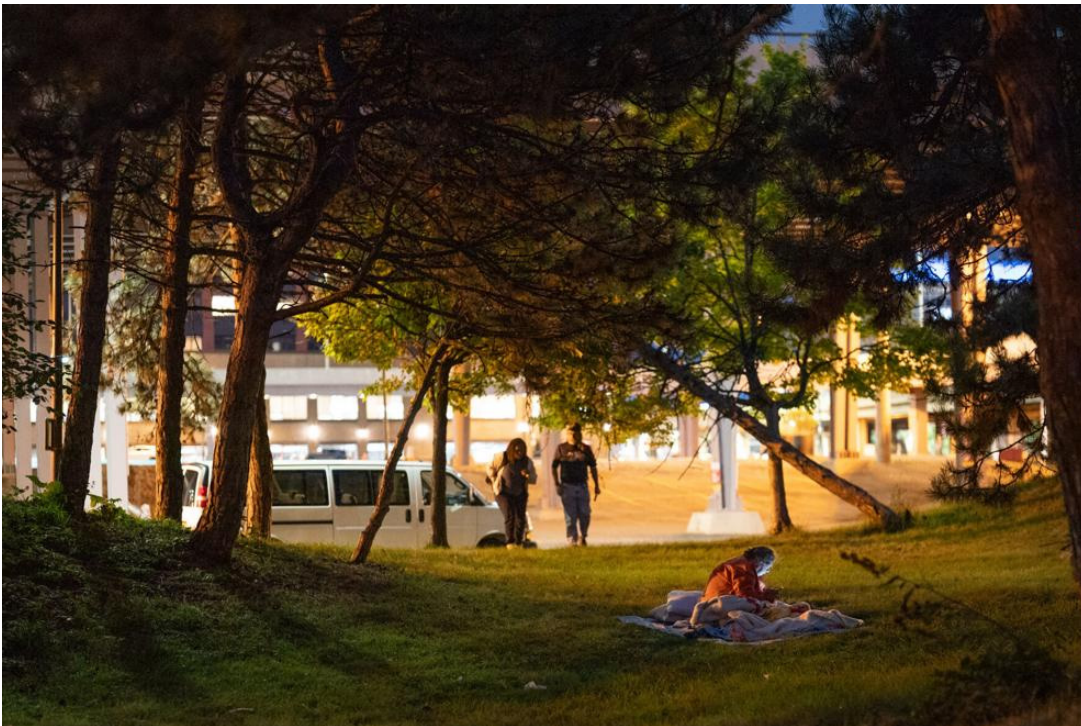
Ryan said his team has already reached out to organizations that work directly with people experiencing homelessness, including the Homeless Alliance of Western New York and Family Promise of Western New York. Since taking office in January, Ryan said he plans to convene a stakeholders meeting to better understand what has changed and how the city should respond.

“We need to listen to people who are experts in the field,” Ryan said. “We have to work with homeless groups, talk to the people who are experiencing homelessness and figure out what’s going on.”

Ryan said prevention will be a key focus. Part of the City of Good Neighbors Housing Plan, funded by New York State, aims to expand the supply of affordable housing and keep people from losing housing in the first place. The plan includes a rental-arrears program designed to help people stay housed after short-term disruptions such as job loss or illness.

“The best way to solve homelessness is to keep people in their homes,” Ryan said. “It’s the most compassionate, but it’s also fiscally prudent.”

Living with it



Lisa Jablonski sits in a makeshift bed as Tanisha Brooks, a homeless outreach case manager from the Matt Urban Human Services Center, and Will Marcy, a homeless advocate, approach her encampment on Tuesday, Aug. 26, 2025. Joed Viera/Buffalo News

The realities of homelessness often play out in plain view.

On a summer night at Franczyk Park in South Buffalo, a Buffalo News reporter and photographer accompanied a pair of outreach workers who were checking on people in known encampments. They were there to offer food, socks, and blankets. These workers frequently bring first aid supplies to homeless encampments, and then try to connect the people they encounter with services that will eventually lead them out of homelessness.

As their van swung around to park, the headlights illuminated a startling sight. It was a woman, perhaps in her 30s but looking older, defecating on the ground, in the open. The only privacy she had was the darkness.

The team quickly turned the van around and the people inside looked away.

"Oh, my God," someone said. Later, the woman was offered food. She took it but didn't say a word. Her embarrassment was evident.



People line up for meals at a Friends Feeding Friends event at Fireman's Park on Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2025. Not everyone who gets a meal is homeless. Many are food insecure and rely on the meals to balance their diets. Joed Viera/Buffalo News

At Fireman's Park near City Hall, people line up well before sunset on days when Friends Feeding Friends gives out meals. Married couples and single adults wait alongside children, seniors and

people with disabilities, some using walkers, wheelchairs or canes. They carry suitcases and rolled up sleeping bags. Some lie on benches or on the grass, their belongings tucked beneath them.

When the food arrives – sandwiches, snacks, coffee and juice – volunteers hand out meals while people eat, talk and help clean up the park. Not everyone in line is homeless, said Regina Weise, who leads the group. Some are food-insecure and rely on the meals to get by. In the summer, the group serves at least 160 people at each outing; in winter, the number drops to about 100.

Groups such as Friends Feeding Friends are part of a network of volunteers and service providers offering food, clothing and outreach, often filling gaps that formal systems cannot. During periods of extreme cold, outreach workers such as Will Marcy spend hours driving people to shelters during Code Blue alerts.

“People are living outside, and I’m just not having it,” Marcy said. “I want people to know that somebody’s got their back.”

For people like Jesse Vaccaro, those public spaces, whether under overhangs, in doorways, or highway near bridges, remain the difference between making it through another night or not.