

# Cayuga County Spent \$3M to House Homeless Residents in Hotels, Shelters In 2023

Robert Harding



A photo of the existing shelter on Grant Avenue in Auburn and a rendering of the proposed shelter that will be built by Housing Visions.

Amid **opposition** to a **proposed emergency housing shelter**, the commissioner of Cayuga County's Department of Social Services detailed Wednesday how much it costs to house homeless individuals in local hotels.

Christine Bianco told the Cayuga County Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee that the county paid \$2,567,000 to rent hotel rooms for homeless individuals and families in 2023. After state reimbursements are calculated, the local share is \$1.3 million.

Bianco explained that the county receives 100% reimbursement for housing families, but there is only a 29% reimbursement to provide shelter for individuals.

The county also paid \$634,000 to place homeless individuals at the Chapel House shelter. The local share, after reimbursements, is \$450,000.

"It's a lot of money that we're spending to provide these services to the folks that are eligible," Bianco said.

In 2023, the county provided emergency housing to 455 adults and 175 children. Those numbers have been on the rise over the past four years. The agency assisted 249 adults and 89 children in 2020.

The committee meeting also gave Bianco a forum to address claims about homelessness and the proposed shelter in Cayuga County.

Housing Visions, a Syracuse-based nonprofit organization, wants to build a three-story, 80-bed emergency shelter on Grant Avenue in Auburn. The county has **allocated \$1 million** to support this project.

The shelter would be operated by Rescue Mission. Case management and support services would be available to homeless individuals housed at the shelter and there would be on-site security.

However, opposition from neighbors led Housing Visions to seek a different location. The developers are in the process of buying the former Holy Family School on North Street and applied for a use variance — a change in how the school is zoned that would allow for an emergency shelter to be placed on the property. But the city of Auburn's Zoning Board of Appeals **rejected the request**.

Housing Visions' original plan to build the shelter on Grant Avenue remains active. The city of Auburn Planning Board is conducting an environmental review before deciding whether to approve the project.

As that process continues, there have been questions about who the county is helping and whether out-of-county or out-of-state residents are being housed here.

Despite the claims made in public meetings, Bianco said the "great majority" of individuals and families are county residents. Her department screens those seeking assistance to determine whether they are eligible for placement in a shelter. The first prioritization level, she said, is that county residents need to be housed first.

Legislator Stephanie DeVito presented a scenario in which an out-of-county resident is homeless and seeks shelter in Cayuga County. Bianco noted that the screening process would determine eligibility, including questions about why the individual is pursuing assistance in another county. But she also reminded legislators that those aren't a majority of cases.

"The point I'm trying to make is people think it's a large, large number of the folks that we are serving and it is not," Bianco added.

Other critics of the proposed shelter have alleged that its proponents are seeking out more homeless individuals to justify the project, and that many people experiencing homelessness decline assistance. These talking points have been used by opponents to question whether the project is needed.

Bianco addressed these claims by acknowledging there are homeless individuals who struggle with addiction or mental health disorders — afflictions that can "get in their way of taking advantage of some of those supports," she said.

Although there are homeless individuals who refuse help, the numbers highlighted by Bianco reflect the people who are requesting assistance from the county. These are individuals or families who contact the department because they need emergency housing.

Before placing individuals or families in a shelter, the county Department of Social Services will advocate for residents. This work includes calls to landlords or identifying family members or friends they could stay with on a temporary basis.

"We're very often successful at having a good outcome and having them not to actually go into an emergency housing shelter or hotel," Bianco said.

But with homelessness on the rise in Cayuga County, there is a growing number of people who are eligible for emergency housing. With a lack of shelter options, the county uses eight hotels — four in the city of Auburn and four in nearby towns — to provide housing for homeless individuals.

The hotel option is not only costly, but it also doesn't put homeless residents in an ideal situation to receive assistance.

"The reason that we're talking about the potential for a larger shelter is to meet the needs of these individuals," Bianco said.