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# Vero Beach

## Magazine®

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### Holiday Feast







BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

# Home Stretch

FOR MANY RESIDENTS, SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS OUT OF REACH

For many of us, Indian River County offers a charming seaside locale where we enjoy year-round sunshine and cultural amenities worthy of a much bigger town. For too many others, though, meeting basic needs remains challenging.

Each year in January, the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council conducts a point-in-time count of homeless people in the county. More than 30 agencies, school liaisons, and outreach teams participated in the 2021 count, which took place on Jan. 26. On that night, 227 adults were counted; 83% of them were designated “unsheltered,” meaning they were sleep-

ing outside, typically on the street, in the woods, in a camp, or in a car. The remaining 17% were in an emergency or transitional shelter, or in a hotel paid for by an agency. The 2021 count also included 34 children, eight of whom were unsheltered.

Compared to the 2020 count, when 464 adults and 122 children were counted, it could appear that great progress has been made. However, in 2021, an increase in emergency resources combined with the statewide moratorium on evictions resulted in a temporary decrease in the number of homeless people, rather than a long-term improvement.

Furthermore, due to

## Low-income residents struggle disproportionately when housing is scarce.

the transient nature of much of this population, it is estimated that local shelters, service providers and schools serve three to four times the number of homeless people identified in the count throughout the year.

As those numbers demonstrate, securing and maintaining afford-

able housing, a basic human need, is problematic for many residents of our county. Low-income residents struggle disproportionately when affordable housing is scarce. As the county’s population grows, addressing the need for thoughtful, informed housing growth will be



Habitat for Humanity volunteers work alongside homebuyers, who purchase their homes with an affordable mortgage. Home ownership can help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

essential to developing livable communities with a high quality of life for all.

There are two primary components of affordable housing. The first is the cost of housing itself. The average single-family home in our county was assessed at approximately \$250,000 last year, and the median sale price was \$370,000. This is 25% higher than the average home price in the state, and 15% higher than the median sale price.

The second component is the relationship between household income and housing costs. People who spend

more than 30% of their income on housing are considered cost burdened, meaning they may not have enough to spend on other basic needs, such as food, transportation, clothing and health care.

While Indian River County has a relatively high percentage of people who reside in homes they own – 80% compared to 65% for the state – a quarter of these homeowners are cost burdened. For residents who rent, the numbers are even worse. More than half of them spend more than 30% of their income on housing expenses. Overall, out of

65,000 households in our county, approximately 20,000 – nearly a third of them – are considered cost burdened or severely cost burdened.

Those most severely cost-burdened households face additional challenges, including overcrowding (12%), lack of kitchen facilities (12%), and incomplete plumbing (11%). Many of these are homes to children and the elderly.

Fortunately, community leaders are already engaged in resolving the county’s affordable housing challenge. Policy addressing this issue is the purview of the Board

of County Commissioners, which depends on the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee. This committee comprises representatives from Fellsmere, Vero Beach and Sebastian, a representative from either Indian River Shores or Orchid, a county commissioner, and six citizens representing various stakeholders interested in affordable housing.

According to Bill Schutt, chief of long-range planning for the county, “In January, 2020, the AHAC proposed 15 recommendations to the Board of County Com-



Habitat provides assistance for after-school and summer care, as well as scholarships for college or trade school for both homeowners and their children.

missioners, almost all of which were approved. These recommendations included new affordable housing targets, revised and expedited permitting processes, small lot subdivisions, increased accessory dwelling size, various reviews of county zoning and municipal regulations related to affordable housing, and acquisition and development of an affordable housing project in Gifford.”

AHAC’s current chair, Sheryl Vittitoe, is optimistic about the

future, despite the rising cost of new homes and low vacancy rates in existing affordable rental units. “AHAC’s leadership, the upcoming availability of increased public dollars, and a strong interest in affordable housing from Indian River County’s philanthropic community are all good indicators of the momentum we are building in our community on this critical issue,” she notes.

In addition to her volunteer service as chair of AHAC, Vittitoe also serves as president

and CEO of Indian River Habitat for Humanity. For more than 30 years, this organization has operated proven programs that deliver decent, affordable housing to Indian River County residents. The nonprofit also provides home repairs to low-income residents and scholarships to help increase economic opportunity and prosperity among Habitat homeowners.

While AHAC works with county commissioners on developing affordable housing, the

Continuum of Care program, led by the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council, works toward the goal of ending homelessness.

The council is responsible for using federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to this end and focuses its efforts on high-risk populations. It provides permanent, supportive housing to men or women suffering from chronic physical or behavioral health conditions, women and children who are victims of domestic violence, or children who are unaccompanied and living on the streets. Services not funded by the council include shorter-term transitional housing, overnight shelter and street outreach services.

Fortunately, local philanthropic organizations exist to fill these gaps. Two local charities, Samaritan Center and Hope for Families Center, operate proven programs to serve homeless families. Homeless men can obtain transitional housing and services from Camp Haven. Specialized transitional housing and services are provided to victims of domestic violence by SafeSpace, and The Source provides services and outreach to homeless men and women living on the streets.



## Other innovative programs are emerging at the intersection of homelessness and affordable housing.

One extremely vulnerable and often overlooked group among the homeless population is disassociated youth, including children in foster care. Last year there were more than 100 children living in foster care in our county. Both the Children’s Home Society and Hibiscus Center offer services at critical times in the lives of these children by working to keep them safe at home or by providing temporary group housing to avoid a crisis.

Other innovative

programs are emerging at the intersection of homelessness and affordable housing. The Housing Emergency Advocacy Response Team works to help families at risk of eviction. HEART is a partnership of the county, the court system, Indian River County Bar Association, Florida Rural Legal Services and the John’s Island Community Service League. It has provided free legal representation and payments of overdue rent or mortgages to more than 200 residents facing eviction due

to circumstances related to the global pandemic.

Another innovation that has developed in this space between affordable housing and homelessness is reflected in the work of the Veterans Council of Indian River County. The Veterans Helping Veterans program completes home improvement projects for local veterans, some of whom have been at risk of losing their permanent housing to condemnation.

Innovation and “doing whatever it takes” is how Hannah Hite and her

team at the Homeless Children’s Foundation are helping homeless children and their families in our community. When a student is identified by the school district as homeless, the foundation steps in to allow “homeless kids to be kids.” Participating children access before- and after-school programs, seasonal camps, and other resources that alleviate suffering and reduce the traumatic effects that homelessness can have, while parents or guardians receive case management and other supportive services that can lead to a more stable housing situation.

While there are many good things happening to improve the lives of people struggling to afford safe housing, your help can make a real difference. Supporting organizations that advance housing priorities is an investment in the future well-being of our community.

Resources available on IRCF’s website at [ircommunityfoundation.org](http://ircommunityfoundation.org) can help you learn more about the problems and identify organizations whose goals are in line with your own. ☼



The reading room at the Hope for Families Center provides a practical space for completing homework.