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## Chappell Elementary pivots to virtual learning

BY HEATHER GRAVES  
EDITOR

GREEN BAY – Just a day after sending out an email to parents and staff regarding potentially critical staff shortages, with moves to temporary virtual learning a possibility – the district announced Chappell Elementary will pivot to virtual learning for three days.

Chappell students learned asynchronous (independently) Thursday, Jan. 6, while teachers readjusted their lesson plans.

Communications Director Lori Blakeslee said the plan is for students to return Tuesday, Jan. 11.

She said if critical staffing shortages at Chappell have not been resolved, families will be notified no later than 9 p.m. Monday.

See SHORTAGES page 19



Steve Murley



# Disregarded

A tent occupied by a pair of unsheltered homeless individuals sits in a wooded area in Howard.

Josh Staloch Photo

## Brown County's state of homelessness

"The problem has gotten to a point where you cannot ignore it anymore."

BY HEATHER GRAVES  
EDITOR

Using a blue tarp as his roof, 49-year-old Madee did his best to protect himself from the elements.

Until recently, the college graduate called a bush near the railroad tracks in downtown Green Bay "home."

Scouring the area for a place to "live" is nothing new for Madee, because he's spent the better part of the past three years on the streets.

The drop in temperatures prompted Madee to seek shelter at St. John's Homeless Shelter, and he's been staying there on and

off since it opened at the beginning of November.

Madee is homeless. He joins dozens, if not hundreds, of other individuals in Brown County who are or have experienced homelessness.

For many, homelessness may seem like a foreign concept – something that could never happen to them.

It can be easy to pretend not to see the guy sleeping in the park, or to ignore the woman standing at an intersection holding a handwritten plea for help.

Terri Refsguard, New Community Shelter chief executive officer, said there is no "typical" homeless person.

She said the reasons

someone is homeless vary drastically – but something all those experiencing homelessness have in common is, it doesn't define who they are.

Refsguard said she uses the phrases "people finding themselves homeless" or "experiencing homelessness, because it's not a permanent situation."

See HOMELESS page 8

## Can't lay off the Blue Suede Foods

BY JOSH STALOCH  
STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY – Rachelle O'Donnell-Lance is doing what she loves, and these days, she's doing it on her own terms.

See FOOD page 6



Rachelle O'Donnell-Lance, owner and chef for Blue Suede Foods, opens up the window of her food truck as she starts her day.

Josh Staloch Photo



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**HOMELESS**  
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"It's a temporary situation," Refsguard said, "and I think that is what our community needs to understand, too. There is not 'the homeless' - this big group of people. It's individuals experiencing homelessness for one reason or another."

**On-going struggle**

Paul VanHandel, Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) member, former Green Bay Police officer and long-time advocate of the homeless, said homelessness in Brown County is nothing new, but rather an ongoing, years-long struggle, often dealt with in the shadows.

"I think the problem has gotten to a point where you cannot ignore it anymore," VanHandel said. "What we were doing before was kind of ignoring that there was a problem to begin with, or we were just not seeing enough of the problems."

Though homelessness has been prevalent in the area long before 2020, he said the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem, as well as made it more visible.

"I think it's a combination of it's gotten a little bit worse, but the pandemic has also gotten it out on the street where it's visible," VanHandel said. "In the past during the day, homeless individuals would be at the library or keeping warm in stores or gas stations. The pandemic took that away, so more and more we see them on the streets and in parks."

And when things are visible, VanHandel said, people



**“ I use the phrases ‘people finding themselves homeless’ or ‘experiencing homelessness,’ because it’s not a permanent situation. It’s a temporary situation, and I think that is what our community needs to understand, too. There is not the homeless – this big group of people. It’s individuals experiencing homelessness for one reason or another.**

- Terri Refsguard, New Community Shelter

really start paying more attention.

"They can't ignore it anymore," he said.

For years, the brunt of the responsibility seems to have fallen on the shoulders of the City of Green Bay, because a large majority of the homeless-related resources and services are centrally-located in the city's downtown.

In 2020, mostly because of the pandemic, the city saw an uptick in homeless individuals gathering in St. John's Park in the heart of downtown Green Bay, generating more than 100

police calls from April to October, including disturbances, public drug use and sexual assaults.

This led City Council to approve an outreach program in the park, facilitated by St. John Homeless Shelter, in hopes of preventing similar issues in the future.

"This is not a solution, this whole thing is not planned to be a solution," Council Vice President Barbara Dorff said at a March 30, 2021, City Council meeting. "This is an intervention in a problem. It wasn't intended to be a solution, but it's a step in the right direction."

**Josh Staloch Photo**

Though the program received strong support from the majority of the council, and was even extended until November, some alderpersons expressed frustration that the "cleanup" fell solely on the City of Green Bay - stressing the need for county involvement in tackling area homelessness long-term.

"It is not enough, in my opinion, to just say the county is at the table," District 9 Alderperson Brian Johnson said at the March 30 meeting. "We heard multiple people say that. And that is wonderful that they are at the table. It is not enough. We need investment. This is a Brown County problem, and the City of Green Bay is bearing the expense. We need county investment."

That investment came in the form of a community homelessness initiative, a collective effort between the Green Bay Community Foundation, the Brown County Homeless and Housing Coalition, Brown County United Way, the City of Green Bay, Brown County and the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

Rashad Cobb, community engagement program officer with the Community Foundation and member of the initiative, said the group gathered data both at a service level and from lived ex-

periences to develop a blueprint aimed at preventing and ending homelessness in the Greater Green Bay region.

There will be more to come on the initiative as the multi-part series continues.

**'I'm not like everybody else'**

VanHandel said people experiencing homelessness in the community can often be marginalized and disregarded.

He said that kind of "implicit bias" of how homeless people are viewed is a lack of understanding.

"I don't think people mean it in a bad way," he said. "I think it's just context. I mean, we've been kind of fed that information for so long, that that's what you tend to believe. But, when I present to any organization or to anyone in the community... We talk about: What is homelessness? What does homelessness look like? Who are these homeless individuals? It's not the stereotypical 40- to 50-year-old male, that is chronically homeless, intoxicated, doesn't want anything, doesn't need anything. Those days are gone. You know, it's not that anymore. It is very complicated."

Refsguard said understanding is key.



"At intake, when people come in for housing, one of the first things many people will say is 'Just so you know, I'm not like everybody else here - you know, like the homeless people,'" she said.

VanHandel said homeless individuals, "trust me, don't want to live this way."

Refsguard said when residents first come in, a staff member takes their picture.

"At some point, the front desk staff will say, 'We should take your picture again, because what a difference,'" she said. "You see people stand a little taller... You can see they have built up that self-sufficiency, and if there is one thing that we can do, that's it. Because, once they have that self-esteem back, they can do anything. They realize who they can be, or who they were."

**How we got here**

VanHandel said more times than not, those who find themselves homeless don't find themselves in that situation voluntarily.

"One of the most visual things talked about in downtown neighborhoods was the impact of homelessness, and why there was such a degree, or so much homelessness," he said. "We found (when I started this work in 2010 as a community police officer) that things that impacted people were Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA), most prominent was alcoholism, which led to a chronic homelessness condition."

VanHandel said much of his early work tackling homelessness focused on increasing the availability of detoxification services.

"People could actually go into treatment and eventually not detox in an emergency room (ER)," he said, "not constantly have police calls, and rescue calls taking them to an ER and then discharged - it was medication stabilization, discharge and then back to the street. We were like, 'This is not helping the situation.'"

VanHandel said it was a consistent circle of recurrence.

"If you look at the way the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) identified chronic homelessness, it said what adds to the cost of chronic homelessness was these levels of services," he said, "because these folks are interacting with those primary delivery systems all the time. It's police. It's rescue. It's hospital ERs, which are very expensive - the most expensive ways of detoxification - and then discharged back to the street."

VanHandel said at that time, shelters weren't appropriately equipped to help individuals dealing with addiction.

"(Many don't) realize, the only drug you can die from in recovery is alcohol," he said. "You can overdose on heroin and meth and all, but in recovery, the only one or maybe one of the outstanding ones that you can die from when you're recovering is alcohol. So, this is the most dangerous, but because it's so prevalent, it just seemed like people weren't accepting of it, but yet they weren't shocked by it either."

See HOMELESS page 9



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**According to HUD, a homeless person costs taxpayers between \$30,000-\$50,000 a year.**



Until recently, Madee was sleeping under a tarp near some railroad tracks in downtown Green Bay. Josh Staloch Photo



**HOMELESS**  
from page 8

VanHandel said at the time there was nowhere for these individuals to go.

"So, they're knocking at the door of the fire department at one point, saying, 'Hey, where can we go?'" he said. "They could get into the Crisis Center, (which provides free, professional, short-term counseling for people of all ages in the Brown County area) lobby for a while and basically be watched, but there was no real place for them. You aren't bad enough at one place, but you aren't self-sufficient enough for another."

And while the detox space itself was limited, many of the programs are voluntary, which VanHandel said causes issues as well.

"You can't hold anyone in protective custody anymore," he said. "Then it becomes voluntary. So, if it's your counseling me, you're going, 'Paul, this is the best thing for you,' but I'm not at that level to change yet. You're at a state called the contemplative and precontemplative state, where in your mind, you're going, 'Paul, you can't keep doing this over and over,' and I'm going, 'But I'm not ready to change. I'm not active, you know, in that circular model. I'm not actively thinking about change. I'm precontemplative.'"

**98%**

**of the people we serve have some type of mental health issue.**

- Terri Refsguard

VanHandel said this then contributed to re-offences and reuse - landing them right back in the situation they were in.

On the other hand, VanHandel said "when they were ready, the system wasn't ready to take them in."

"There weren't enough openings, coupled with the fact that the Brown County Mental Health Treatment Center, its primary licensure was for mental health, not detoxification, but they were taking in more people in detoxification than they were in mental health at the time..." he said. "So, their way of dealing with that was to say, 'OK, we're not doing any more detoxification here.' That was 2012."

Which VanHandel said left many in limbo with no where to go but back on the streets.

In 2016, with the help of the Brown County Homeless and Housing Coalition's Basic Needs

committee, detoxification services were restored at Bellin Psychiatric.

"We got some of our chronic homeless people at the time into the program," VanHandel said.

At that same time, shelters, like St. John's, were evolving, too, and started to provide sobriety rooms, which allows guests to be more closely monitored.

"That being said, our threshold is that they need to be able to provide complete self-care..." St. John's Homeless Shelter Executive Director Lexie Wood said. "They need to be able to take care of themselves, they need to be able to make their bed, or use the bathroom facilities or get their own meal. We are looking at the health and safety of that individual as well as all of the other guests in the shelter."

**Cause shift**

VanHandel, Refsguard and Wood agree - the needs of the homeless population have changed.

"I'd say 98% of the people we serve have some type of mental health issue," Refsguard said.

VanHandel said needs have evolved into "this mental health aspect where it's much less about alcohol or AODA - certainly you're never going to take that away."

"But, now what we're finding is that it's transcended to mental health," he said. "If we could solve mental health, we could probably solve a lot of their homeless circumstances, as well."

When she started in her role in 2012, Wood said while mental health was an issue, the major underlying cause of homelessness was job loss.

"We had an individual in the shelter my very first season who was unmedicated and battling some pretty significant paranoid schizophrenia," she said. "It was known, and the shelter took care of him. The staff, other guests and volunteers - everyone kind of looked out for him, because everyone knew this particular guest was struggling with some pervasive mental health."

Now if you walk into St. John's Shelter, Wood said, "it's not just one guest that people are looking out for and taking care of."

"It's the majority of



The average temperature in Green Bay in January is 9 degrees. These individuals are getting out of the cold and receiving a warm meal and a place to sleep from St. John's Homeless Shelter. Scott Eastman Photo

**“As a community, or as a provider of services, we need to figure out how we are going to help those individuals who have fallen through the cracks,”**

- Terry Refsguard

our population," she said. "Many times it feels like we're an extension of inpatient mental health services, or certainly an extension of outpatient services. So, I would say mental health has become the overarching symptom we see as to why someone is experiencing homelessness, especially at St. John's."

Refsguard said New Community Shelter is also seeing a lot of people struggling with mental health issues - everything from "severe mental health issues to depression."

"That is tough to serve in a facility like ours when that individual needs to stay in a room with seven other people," Refsguard said. "Ninety-eight percent of the people we serve have some type of mental health issue."

**A \$1.1 million cost**

In 2013, and again in 2016, VanHandel said a study was presented to the Basic Needs Committee on the most chronic homelessness individuals in Brown County, and the costs associated with them.

"We wanted to come up with a cost factor so we could say to people, 'Hey, these are the costs,'" he said.

According to HUD, a homeless person costs taxpayers between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year - medical services, first responders, police time, transportation, etc.

VanHandel said it again goes back to the circle of

recurrence.

"Our people fell right in line with the national average," he said. "Shocking. In 2013, our top 40 most chronic homeless in the community cost \$750,000 dollars for that year. And in 2016, it went up to more than \$1 million - at one point about \$1.1 million dollars - cost to the community."

Wood noted these costs don't factor in shelters.

"That number would be the community costs without even accounting for shelter services and primary physicians," she said. "I believe that total came out to about \$46,000 per individual per year, which I know is pretty consistent with what they say it takes to provide housing for chronically homeless individuals."

**Falling through the cracks**

Green Bay is home to six homeless shelters - St. John's, New Community, House of Hope, Golden House, Freedom House and Safe Shelter, which opened this past fall.

Wood said space isn't the issue - there are beds.

"We as shelter executive directors have met pretty routinely and we've agreed and have shared with the community that (in) Green Bay it's not a capacity issue," she said. "We have (six) shelters who are serving singles and families and the whole demographic,

and yet there are people falling through the cracks."

Unfortunately, she said, sometimes mental health issues prevent individuals from being able to use them.

"It's a very delicate line," she said. "St. John's is the shelter of last resort. We recognize that if somebody is in need of our services, if for any reason we need to turn them away, there is not an alternative option that we're turning them to, and that is a really, really challenging piece to our mission."

Wood said she'd describe it as a pervasive mental health and inability-to-attach-people-to-the-appropriate-services barrier.

"At St. John's, we are congregate living," she said. "Again, we need to ensure the safety of both that individual, as well as all of the individuals at our shelter. So for somebody who's battling extreme mental health, for instance, that can be displayed in various ways - (such as) physical aggression - and you know that really aggressive behavior ultimately is tied to mental health, but you can't leave somebody in shelter whose mental health can result in extreme aggression that's a danger to themselves or to other people."

Refsguard said recent discussions amongst shelter directors and other community stakehold-

**NEXT WEEK:**  
Disregarded: Life on the streets follows the path of unsheltered individuals in Brown County. From a tent in the woods to a park bench, part two in our multi-part series focuses on the struggles these individuals face on a daily basis.

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**DISREGARDED: THE VIDEO**  
In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the educational partner of the NEW News Lab, The Press Times compiled a supporting video to accompany the series' written pieces. Please visit The Press Times Facebook page to view this impactful piece.

ers have centered around looking at how "might we address this differently?"

"As a community, or as a provider of services, we need to figure out how we are going to help those individuals who have fallen through the cracks - the chronically homeless, the severally-meantally ill and those with great medical challenges," she said. "We have to figure out what we are going to do to help those people. It sounds like an assisted-living setting. If it is, then let's do it, because what an accomplishment that would be for Green Bay, to bring our homeless population on the streets down to next to nothing. How awesome would that be? And how awesome would that be for those people."

Refsguard said discussions on so-called non-traditional shelter have started.

"We have come together, and we have recognized the gap," she said. "Now what?"

**“We have come together, and we have recognized the gap,” Refsguard said. “Now what?”**

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