

## CYCLE

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help them fix those things first, so they won't need us again."

However, it's important to note that not everyone receiving assistance is jobless.

"They might be at risk of losing their job because they lost their apartment or they lost their transportation," said Neal. "So many people live paycheck to paycheck and have insurmountable debt for various reasons, and the barriers to them becoming independent are just too many."

But while employers are often responsible for terminating employees that have poor attendance, they can also help ease the burden.

"Ottawa County is a very generous place," said Rebekah Bakker, director of development at the Children's Advocacy Center. "We have a beautiful model of collaboration between government, business and nonprofits. But I think businesses should take the time to sit on panels, get involved and lend their expertise. The money is great, don't get me wrong. But investing on a ground level is important."

Neal agrees. "We need businesses to step up and be part of the solution," she said. "I think one of the keys is to get involved, volunteer, give financially, support the nonprofits in your area that are really combating the heart of the homelessness issue. It's more than just meeting the basic needs of people. It's helping them long term."

One business owner looking to combat homelessness is Helen Zeerip, president of Teddy's Transport.

"I can't stand homelessness," said Zeerip. "I can't. At night, in bed, when the snow is flying and I'm laying there, I just think of all these kids and



According to owner and manager Hemant Patel, the Economy Inn was home to many who couldn't afford to go elsewhere. [SENTINEL FILE]

people that are homeless and I can't deal with it. We've got them here, everywhere."

While watching a training video required to renew her foster care license, Zeerip learned that children in the foster care system are often considered "unadoptable" after they reach a certain age. She also learned that many children become homeless after aging out of the system, starting yet another cycle.

"The girls age out," said Zeerip. "And they don't have anywhere to go. So, they end up with a guy. Many of them get pregnant. They don't know how to be a mom, because they've never had a mom. Those kids end up back in the system. It's a vicious, vicious cycle."

The idea so upset Zeerip that she started her own nonprofit — Grant Me Hope. The organization is a marketing initiative that produces videos of children who are wards of the state and available for adoption. The videos air on partnering television news stations in Michigan and Ohio.

According to Zeerip, business owners must choose to be part of the solution.

"You can always give

money to homeless shelters and that's a given," said Zeerip. "But if you can get your whole team aware of what's going on, they see things you don't see. For example, we just gave all of our employees a small bonus, and we told them to take part of that bonus, help someone in need and report back what they did. We've got 80 people out there making a difference."

Zeerip also believes employers can make job security easier for employees under pressure at home.

"We have to make exceptions for single parents," she said. "It's too hard for them to meet all of the criteria we set when they have a family. We have to encourage and support single parents that are living paycheck to paycheck. If not, we'll have more homeless parents with kids."

Some businesses can help combat homelessness in more direct ways. For example, according to owner and manager Hemant Patel, the Economy Inn was home to many people who couldn't afford to go anywhere else.

That was before the business had its license revoked by Holland City Council. The revocation

came in early October after three code violations within six months, a rule put in place by a 2016 ordinance that aimed to further restrict hotels after long-standing issues with Economy Inn and its neighbor, the Wooden Shoe.

Despite documented problems with overflowing garbage, inoperable vehicles and excessive police calls, the Economy Inn offered affordable weekly rates that made it an option for otherwise homeless men, women and children. When the hotel was shut down, all guests were asked to leave.

The controversial decision by the city council fueled complaints about a lack of affordable housing in Ottawa County.

Greater Ottawa County United Way's 2018 Community Assessment found that the shortage in affordable rental units increased by 86.2 percent between 2012 and 2015, primarily due to increasing construction costs, stagnant wages and more families falling below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold.

The ALICE threshold represents individuals and families who are working but are unable to

afford the basic necessities of housing, food, child care, health care and transportation.

According to Neal, finding affordable housing is a common problem for mission tenants looking to transition into independent living.

"They're staying with us longer because they're having a more difficult time finding affordable, appropriate housing," she said. "And appropriate housing is important. For some of the folks we're working with, if they come here with a drug or alcohol addiction and they've been sober, to have them move out and get roommates that also struggle with addiction is not a good living situation."

However, Neal doesn't believe the solution to affordable housing rests solely in the hands of municipalities.

"In my personal opinion, I don't think it's necessarily the city's job to solve the problem," she said. "I think that every civic member of our community has a responsibility to help."

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