

# Panelists Discuss Homelessness in Edwardsville, Say Overnight Warming Location is "Going to Happen"

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
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EDWARDSVILLE - Community members gathered for a panel discussion on homelessness and the new Overnight Warming Location in Edwardsville.

On Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, the [League of Women Voters of the Edwardsville Area \(LWVEA\)](#) sponsored the discussion at St. John's Methodist Church in Edwardsville. Panelists included Michelle Babb, Director of Servant Ministries at St. John's; Cornelia Smith, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Edwardsville Community Unit School District #7 (ECUSD7); Lindsey Apple, pastor at Newsong Fellowship Church;

David Kerr, with [Madison County Community Development \(MCCD\)](#); and Peter Hough, the minister who oversees the Overnight Warming Location in Alton. The discussion was moderated by John Harvey, a LWVEA member and organizer with the Edwardsville Community Housing Alliance.

The panelists discussed the rate of homelessness in the Edwardsville area and some of the assistance programs available through Madison County. They also answered questions about Alton's Overnight Warming Location (OWL) and how the OWL will work in Edwardsville. Harvey said the Edwardsville OWL is moving forward despite some pushback from community members.

"There are trained volunteers, they have the cost, they have the food arranged, they visited the Red Cross and Salvation Army, done a lot of due diligence, talked about the use of Narcan. There's a lot of planning that's gone into it," he said. "There is some pushback from the neighborhood, which, dialogue, at this time, I think is happening, I hope. But the mayor has gone on record as saying he wants it. I mean, it appears it's going to open."

## **How the Overnight Warming Location Works**

The Edwardsville OWL will open this year at First Baptist Church at 534 St. Louis Street. Apple and Babb have helped to organize the Edwardsville location. The OWL will be modeled after the Alton OWL, which Hough has overseen for five years now.

Hough explained that the OWL is open when temperatures are forecasted to drop below 20 degrees Fahrenheit. In Alton, the doors to Deliverance Temple open at 5 p.m. Volunteers and unhoused community members eat dinner together and socialize until lights out at 11 p.m. In the morning, everyone has breakfast and volunteers help people decide where they will go to stay warm during the day. Community members are given two bus tokens so they can return to the OWL that night, as 84% of unhoused people surveyed by OWL said a lack of transportation was their biggest issue.

While OWL does not solve homelessness, Hough noted that having an Overnight Warming Location can at least get people through the night. He added that his team had approached Alton City Council about creating a task force and staying "proactive," and the City Council put the Alton Police Chief in charge of this measure, a move Hough characterized as "ineffective."

"To take an enforcement approach to a long-term, chronic social problem is very Alton and very ineffective," he said. "A lot of times, we look at an unhoused person, we go, 'Well, this clearly is the person who is unwell in our community.' But then I look at my city and I say, 'We spend exactly \$0 to address not just homelessness but affordable

housing, and we've done that for decades, and we ignore and try to police the problem out of existence.' I see some profoundly unwell people who are creating and sustaining some of these policies. It's not just an unhoused person who needs to be healed. It's a whole community."

## **Homelessness in Madison County**

Kerr noted that it's difficult to know for sure how many community members are unhoused in Madison County at any given time, but the estimated number is around 100. There are 40 rooms in Madison County that Kerr and MCCD help community members get into as emergency housing, and MCCD has some grant money that they can use to put people up in motels when temperatures are dangerously cold.

But Kerr said the community needs resources above all else.

"From my perspective, the greatest need that we have is shelter space," he explained. "And, you know, no one really wants a shelter. But the county does have money to build a shelter. There is \$2.5 million with the American Rescue Plan, and we have put out a request for people to give us proposals to build shelters and show us how they're going to run those shelters."

He added that the coordinated entry system, which uses a centralized phone number to track requests for housing and rent assistance, is where MCCD experiences a "bottleneck" because there aren't enough resources to have someone on the phones 24 /7. However, this is still the best way to connect with MCCD's programs. To receive help from MCCD, call 618-296-5300 and make sure to leave a message.

## **Homelessness in Schools**

Smith discussed how homelessness affects kids in ECUSD7. She said that administrators and teachers try to be "diligent" about identifying students who are unhoused so they can offer assistance.

An unhoused student might be part of a family experiencing homelessness, couchsurfing after being kicked out of their home, a runaway, or in a housing situation where two or more families are "doubled up" and living in a small space together. Smith said their district currently has around 25 students who are considered homeless.

While ECUSD7 has several measures in place to assist unhoused students, they rarely meet students or families who self-identify as homeless. Smith said many parents are afraid that they will lose their children if the school knows about their living situation, but she emphasized this is not the case.

“For many folks experiencing homelessness, it's embarrassing for them to admit to school people that they are in that situation, because they are afraid that we are going to call DCFS and they are going to lose their children. So they're not necessarily going to come forward and say, ‘I am in the situation and I need some help,’” Smith said. “We do not report folks experiencing homelessness to DCFS. Unless we think it’s a situation where a child is being physically abused, no, we do not.”

Instead, the district will work with the family to make sure the student has transportation to and from school. They might also supply school and cleaning supplies or personal hygiene items, and the student will receive a free or reduced lunch. There are laws in place to protect unhoused students at school and make it easier for them to complete their education.

“It is important that we are able to identify those students because it is beneficial to the families once we know that,” Smith added.

## **Staying Warm This Winter**

As temperatures drop, warming centers will open around the Edwardsville area. The Edwardsville Public Library, Edwardsville Police Station and both YMCAs operate as warming centers during the day. The Edwardsville OWL will open this winter. To know which nights the Alton and Edwardsville OWLs are open, check out the [official Overnight Warming Locations Facebook page](#).