

# Missoula panel on homelessness says more respite beds needed

By KEILA SZPALLER | Posted: Tuesday, February 22, 2011

Ten respite beds could be the beginning of the end of homelessness in Missoula.

People who don't have homes in Missoula get sick with things like cancer, and Mary Jane Nealon said there aren't enough beds for them to rest.

"Every morning, they beg our medical providers to choose them for our one respite bed," said Nealon, with Partnership Health Center.

Nealon spoke Tuesday as a panelist at a meeting about ending homelessness. At least 75 people - including nonprofit leaders, folks who have been homeless, and local government officials - gathered to hear findings from the recently released "Homelessness and Housing Instability in Missoula Needs Assessment 2010."

Panelists presented the problem in terms of cold hard numbers - like the \$3 million St. Patrick Hospital contributed to charity care in 2009 - and also in terms of the political atmosphere in the country. The latter drew a rousing round of applause.

County attorney Fred Van Valkenburg, who sounded like a preacher at the pulpit toward the end of his delivery, said he encounters homelessness in the realm of violent crimes.

Forrest Salcido was stomped to death over a couple beers, and while extreme, Van Valkenburg said cases like his are worth noting: "They're important because they tell a story of the consequences of homelessness."

And he said the way a community cares for its weakest members is a reflection of who people are as human beings. Then, he blasted divisive tax policies and the overall effort in the country to "divide and conquer."

"The rich get richer. The poor get poorer. There are tremendous income disparities. ... The entire political system has turned one against another, and people have got to stand up and say this isn't American. This isn't what we really believe in. We can do better than this. ... We want our society to do better," Van Valkenburg said, to an eruption of applause.

Mayor John Engen, who commissioned the study and led the meeting, joked about adjourning the meeting after the county attorney's speech. But others had ideas to offer, too.

Glenn McKanna, who has experienced homelessness, said more public housing is in order. Some veterans are afraid of crowds so they won't spend the night in the Poverello Center and need their own rooms.

"I think the assistance that we have, it needs to be broadened out," McKanna said.

At the meeting, report author Maxine Jacobson again reviewed some of the key findings she has shared with the Missoula City Council and Board of County Commissioners, who helped pay for the study.

For starters, people who are homeless aren't visiting Missoula from elsewhere, she said. Many call Missoula home and have for years and even decades. Secondly, the notion that providing services will only draw more people is a myth, she said. This isn't a case of build-it-and-they-will-come.

"I think we've already built what it is that brings people here and what we've got is this cohesive, supportive, attractive community," Jacobson said.

Reporter Keila Szpaller can be reached at @KeilaSzpaller, 523-5262, [keila.szpaller@missoulain.com](mailto:keila.szpaller@missoulain.com) or on [MissoulaRedTape.com](http://MissoulaRedTape.com).