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Terri Jett: We can end homelessness if we care enough to do work

No one should be homeless in America. As a nation, affordable housing for everyone, regardless of circumstances and status, must be accessible. In this city, with such a promising future, flourishing with development possibilities and ongoing neighborhood revitalization, we cannot allow families to be forced to spend a night in their car because of a lack of available housing. While recognizing there are many factors that cause people to end up without a home, the bottom line is that homelessness must be eliminated.

On the national level, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness reports that on any given night more than 100,000 adults fall into the category of chronic homelessness. Most are approaching age 50, a third are veterans, and many have disabling health conditions.

Homeless families with children number nearly 250,000 people at any one time, and over the course of a school year nearly 1 million children are identified by the U.S. Department of Education as homeless.

Tens of thousands of teenagers leave home each year as a result of family conflict that may include physical or sexual abuse. The

Department of Education reported that 53,000 of those youth used school-based programs during the 2008-2009 school year, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that at least 23,000 teens accessed emergency shelter or transitional housing in 2009. The Council on Homelessness also has found that one-quarter of former foster youth experience homelessness within four years of exiting foster care. Unfortunately, along with the instability of a home, they have a high prevalence of depression, suicide, substance abuse and mental health disorders. This is heartbreaking.

In Indianapolis, about 15,000 people suffer from homelessness in any given year, and about 30 percent are children, according to the city's Blueprint to End Homelessness. They have suffered challenges such as job loss, housing foreclosure, domestic violence and illnesses -- life difficulties to which we all are vulnerable.

Remarkably, the Indianapolis Housing Task

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Force, with support from the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention, in 2001 coordinated the development of a 10-year strategic plan called the Blueprint to End Homelessness. The plan took a year to draft and involved more than 150 organizations. Those efforts have had success over the past decade.

As stated in the report, the intent was to be proactive in "helping 2,100 households obtain or retain affordable, stable housing within the first five years." To sustain efforts, the Blueprint suggested streamlining and linking services and funding "using a strengths-based approach that engages people who receive assistance by capitalizing on their skills and interests, and strives to prevent homelessness for those at-risk by providing access to job training and medical and child care."

At the time, the plan's developers could not have anticipated the economic crisis we would be crawling through 10 years later, and yet the number of homeless people in the city has declined on any given night from more than 3,000 to around half that number.

It's important to note, however, that this does not include families and individuals who may temporarily double up with friends or family or stay in hotels. The Blueprint emphasizes that the point is not to simply increase the number of temporary shelters available, but to find stable, affordable housing first, and then to address any other conditions that cause difficulties for individuals and families to

maintain permanent residence.

A community forum on homelessness, scheduled for 9 a.m. Nov. 22 in the Krannert Room of the Indiana Interchurch Center, will allow the public to weigh in on strategies to further reduce homelessness in Indianapolis. I encourage all who care and who are willing to help to attend.

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