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# Maine's Homeless Families: An Interview with Helen Hemminger

Helen Hemminger

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# Maine's Homeless Families

## *An Interview with Helen Hemminger*

*Since 1991 Helen Hemminger has been director of The Tedford Shelter, a homeless shelter serving adults and families in the Brunswick area. In this interview, Hemminger provides a first-hand account of Maine's changing homeless population. The good news, she reports, is that the percentage of people with mental illnesses staying at the shelter has gone down. The bad news is that since 1994 the shelter has experienced a steady increase in the number of homeless families. As Hemminger notes, there are more Maine families today working very hard to make ends meet. Living on a precarious edge, one setback—like temporary unemployment or a health problem—can put them over the edge and, literally, on the streets. Hemminger provides her thoughts on how best to help this growing, vulnerable population.*

Maine Policy Review (MPR): *You mentioned the Tedford Shelter serves the Brunswick area—including Lincoln and Sagadahoc counties, Freeport, Harpswell, and Lisbon Falls. Given the current economic boom in this region, have you seen a change in the magnitude of the homelessness problem?*

**HELEN HEMMINGER:** The Tedford Shelter can take up to eighteen single adults and five families at a time. We provide shelter for single adults in the building we own, and we rent three apartments for families. In recent years, the number of single adults we serve has remained steady or declined somewhat, and the good news is the percentage of people with mental illnesses staying at the shelter has gone down. Our local mental health center has done a very good job helping the people who have had the most difficult time in the past find housing and keep it—they're getting much more support.

The bad news is that since 1994 we've experienced a steady increase in the number of homeless families. In fiscal year 1994 we recorded 1,057 family-bed nights, and that number has risen steadily each year. For example, in fiscal year 1998 we recorded 3,233 family-bed nights. In terms of the number of families, this is a jump from twenty-seven families in fiscal year 1993 to eighty-seven families in fiscal year 1998. At one point our ratio was three times as many bed-nights for single adults as for families. Now that ratio is about fifty/fifty. We've tried to respond to this shift: We now have a family case worker who works thirty-two hours a week; we've rented a third apartment so we can serve four to five families at any given time—but we're still turning them away. Other shelter providers are recording dramatic increases as well—in this region as well as in Presque Isle.

MPR: *Why do you think so many more families are homeless today than five years ago?*

**HEMMINGER:** For one thing, there is more pressure on the housing market because the economy is good. Families with bad references—or who have never rented before—are finding it more difficult to find housing. We're also seeing more evictions than before. Roughly 44% of the families we serve say they're homeless because of inadequate housing. Usually this means the family has been doubling up with friends, or they're split up among friends and relatives; it may have been months since the family had its own apartment. I know of one mom with two teenage girls who camped out for five weeks, and then she moved

her family into a motel where they shared one room. Everything the mom earned was going toward paying for that motel room. Eventually she had to parcel out her children to different friends and the dog went somewhere else.

Frequently, there are also health issues that contribute to family homelessness. Some of them are mental health issues, but a lot of what we see are regular medical health issues. Lack of health insurance is a part of the problem. However, if someone is seriously ill, they cannot go to work, which means they have no income during that time, and eventually they get evicted. For example, in December, 1997, we worked with a two-parent family: both parents worked at McDonald's; they had two kids, and mom was pregnant. They were juggling everything until the last month of the pregnancy. The mother had planned to take time off from work and they were going to make it; however, the time around the baby's birth was difficult. First, the mother had to lay down for the last four weeks of her pregnancy. Then, although she'd planned to return to work immediately after the baby was born, she injured her back and had to continue laying down. The father had to take time off from work to care for their two preschool children and the infant. As a result, he lost his job. Without any income, they ended up homeless.

The data collected by the State show fewer families on welfare than ever before. However, many of these families are working awfully hard to juggle everything, and one setback can put them over the edge.

MPR: *Homeless families seem to be more hidden from public view: the parents may be working; the kids are in school. Yet they have nowhere to go at the end of the day.*

**HEMMINGER** That's right. Homeless families are very different from the stereotypical homeless person. For example, I brought a fifteen-year-old girl to a meeting of the State's Interagency Task Force on Homelessness to speak about her experience of being homeless. She and her mom were staying in one of our apartments. She was attending a private academy, and her mother was driving a considerable distance to get her to school on time. But she did not feel she could tell the school officials about her situation. For one thing, there is a tuition fee for any student who is not from that town; plus she was embarrassed. She was a good student and so forth. Most people's picture of a homeless adolescent is of someone who has left home to live on his or her own. Yet there are just as many teenagers living with their parents in homeless shelters as there are teenagers living on their own.

...it is certainly a lot cheaper to assess a family's needs before they enter the shelter, and to try to keep them in their current house or apartment. This is where I think we've lost ground.

MPR *What types of families do you see?*

**HEMMINGER** Roughly 40% of the families we serve are single moms with one pre-school child. Then there are two-parent families with four or five children, and then we see some parents with older children. I think it's a bigger deal for a mom to displace a family with school-aged children, so they're more apt to try other solutions before we see them. There are a lot of young twenty- to twenty-five-year-old moms who feel they can stay with friends and bring their children along in tow. Eventually this doesn't work out.

MPR *How do you assess whether you can take a family in?*

**HEMMINGER** Because we're often full, we have to be careful about who we're taking in. We try to fully assess the situation: Has the family been through the whole eviction process? Can they stay with family members a bit longer? It might take us a day or two to really assess the family situation to see whether they can come in or, if we are full, whether they can rely on General Assistance to pay for them to be sheltered in a motel. There's also a church group in Bath that occasionally will put up a family in a motel room for a couple of nights. In general, it's a little more difficult for families to come in—they have a few more gates to walk through before we determine whether we can provide them with shelter. On the other hand, a single adult can simply show up at our door.

MPR *What kinds of services do you offer families?*

**HEMMINGER** Once we've placed a family in one of our apartments, we begin working with them to help solve the reasons for their homelessness. We require that the kids attend school. A couple of families we worked with wanted to home school their children and we had to say, "that's great, but not while you're staying here." We really have to focus on housing. We focus primarily on the family's emergency needs: they need housing and they may need an income. We pay up to \$250 in security deposits for families moving on to their own apartments. If they don't have an income, it may be because they haven't applied for TANF

[Temporary Assistance for Needy Families]. Or, if we're working with a two-parent family that isn't eligible for welfare benefits, they need a job. They may need to get their car repaired. Sometimes we can help with that or get another organization to help.

We're usually able to give the families we serve some toys (and around the holidays there's always a lot more). We've provided school supplies for kids; we've gotten a few kids computers. We got one thirteen-year-old boy a bicycle but never gave it to him because he wasn't attending school. His family has since moved on to permanent housing but the bicycle is still in my office. One particular teenager asked us for money to attend a play in Portland that her whole class was going to see. The play was required and they were to supposed to write a report about it afterward, but she didn't have the \$8 to cover the half-price ticket. The things we provide can be that basic. In general, we do pretty well in terms of getting the physical things a family or a child might need; however, we don't have the resources to provide services like counseling or to pay outstanding bills for the family. Others may not know the family is homeless, but our lodging is temporary—no longer than thirty to forty-five days. Once a family (or an individual) has left the shelter they cannot re-enter for thirty days.

MPR *What are some of the hurdles families face in terms of getting back on their feet?*

**HEMMINGER** Well, the good news is if somebody is seriously looking for a job they can find one—times are good. There are four temporary agencies posted at The Tedford Shelter. Even people with criminal histories, or who have had problems working in the past, are getting hired for something. However, there still are barriers. Younger families need day care. They may be able to obtain a day care voucher but families can run into the chicken and egg problem—they can't get a day care voucher until they have a job lined up, but they can't commit to a job without day care. They also need good transportation. Much of work that is available does not fall between the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Instead, they might be expected to work 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., or overnight, or various days of the weekends.

The Department of Human Services has tried to offer reasonable assistance to families that are not eligible for welfare. For example, the Department of Human Services has a \$250 loan program for people who need to get their car repaired in order to go to work. This is pretty good, but it can still be difficult for families to piece together all the supports they might need in order to get back on their feet. For example, we've seen a number of poor, working, two-parent families who end up homeless because they lack subsidized housing. They can't afford to live where they're living; they're in the process of getting evicted; they may have doubled up with another family; they cannot continue living as they are. These families are having difficulty finding another place to live. The dark side of good economic times is affordable housing becomes more difficult to find—the housing market is tighter.

*MPR It sounds as if you do a lot of problem solving with families. What would make your work easier?*

**HEMMINGER** First, it is certainly a lot cheaper to assess a family's needs before they enter the shelter, and to try to keep them in their current house or apartment. This is where I think we've lost ground. In 1994 the State changed how the General Assistance program was administered, and that year—as a direct result—we saw a big increase in the number of homeless families. (We jumped from serving twenty-seven to fifty-two families that year.) The program has become much stricter with more cumbersome limits. The message to families has been: "We need to see exactly how you've spent your money, and any money that we believe is misspent doesn't count. So, if you come to us and say you've spent your money to visit a dying relative in New York City, and you bought a bus ticket to get there, and you took a week off from work to make the trip, you did things that caused your homelessness. Therefore, your current request is not an emergency and we won't pay." Any number of people who used to get General Assistance benefits to help them keep their housing, don't get it anymore. In essence, there was a good system and its gone.

If a family seeks help from the General Assistance office by saying, "this is my situation; this is what I need," there shouldn't be all these limits to getting that need met. Instead, the response should be "Okay, this is what we'll do for you; these are our expectations. Come to us next month and show us what you've done." I don't want to eliminate accountability from the program,

nor allow families to think the town is always going to pay no matter what, but there needs to be more flexibility, and the rules need to be much less rigid. Most communities have found they've reduced by half the amount they give out in General Assistance. Parallel to this trend, is that the number of homeless families has been increasing. The issue is worthy of some research.

Second, in general, our policies for dealing with family homelessness should focus on shortening the time that families need to be in a shelter, or eliminating the need for them to come to a shelter at all. If we could eliminate the homelessness step and help families get their needs met, that would be really big. Homelessness is an embarrassing step for many—a dislocating step. In particular, if you're a child, you have to switch schools; you may not feel as if you can talk to your friends about it; you can't invite other kids home during that time. I spoke to one young woman who was homeless with her mom, and she said, "I never thought I would be in this situation, but I need to help my mother because she is struggling right now—and she has been a good mom to me. So, I'm going to follow through on everything she asks me to do. I'm going to clean my room, I'm going to do whatever I can to help around the house, and I'm not going to complain that we're living in a shabby little apartment for six months. I know we will get through this." You know, her mom was not someone with a lot of problems; she'd simply experienced a series of setbacks. Hopefully, we can find more ways to help these types of families find and keep affordable housing. It's the least we can do to help them maintain as a family. 🐟



*Helen Hemminger has been executive director of The Tedford Shelter since 1991. She has a masters degree in the management of Human Services from Brandeis University. Prior to 1991, Ms. Hemminger worked for social services agencies in Washington and Massachusetts.*