

As you travel through the Lehigh Valley for work or play you may have noticed an increase in people sleeping outside. And if you are thinking there are more tents and sleeping bags than in previous years you would be correct. Nationwide, we witnessed a 12% increase in unsheltered people last year. This was nothing compared to the 32% increase across Lehigh & Northampton Counties alone. Unfortunately, 2024 unsheltered counts look to be even more stark, based on early assessments.

New Bethany knows this to be true. Hunger and homelessness are strongly connected issues. Our Southside Drop-in Center moved from a pre-pandemic average of 60 people served to an average of 100 people served daily. Our food pantry used to have about a half dozen families pick up free groceries on a given morning and now sees at least 15 and sometimes up to an incredible 40 families every day. We have had to increase both staff and volunteer opportunities just to make ends meet.

We are not alone. Communities worldwide are adopting new policies to address increases of people in economic crisis. Lately I look to the city of London (yes, that London, in the U.K. “across the pond”) for a set of principles that I believe New Bethany, our friends and neighbors, have already adopted. It gives me hope that we can address this issue locally and ultimately reduce the instances of “rough sleeping” to borrow a London term for sleeping outside. Consider the following principles from London’s Charter to End Rough Sleeping and see for yourself how each of us can immediately begin to do our part to end homelessness.

**Principle #1: Accepting People.** Remember that while people “may have problems, they aren’t problem people” as the London charter reads. At New Bethany, we treat even the most difficult guests with the grace needed to provide support. After all, if your entire life is confined to a tent or less, then you are enduring some of the most unreasonable stress one can imagine.

**Principle #2: Partnerships.** In the London charter, partnerships refer to working together with people who have lived experience in sleeping outside. This means working alongside current and formerly unhoused people who are the true experts in what is necessary to survive. It means not referring to “those people” and instead welcoming our neighbors. Our staff understand you never know a person’s story or the appropriate intervention unless you work alongside a person to find solutions.

**Principle #3: Open-Minded.** Recognize that every person has their own story, and it might not fall neatly in our worldview. Do we treat people the same regardless of how they arrived to be unhoused? Are we prepared to help our LGBTQ+ friends and neighbors? Do we have room for undocumented persons with children? Are we ready to assist previously incarcerated individuals re-entering society? At New Bethany our answer must be “yes,” because we know there is always more to a person’s situation than any stereotype or stigma might suggest.

**Principle #4: Safety for everyone.** Feeling safe is a profound quality for neighbors at New Bethany. Our drop-in center has many people gathered in the same room for extended periods of time. Do people feel safe? Respected? Our staff and volunteers go through great pains to

ensure we demonstrate that hate is not tolerated, violence is not condoned, and people are able to access services without feeling shame or trepidation.

**Principle #5:** Helping people thrive. Food and housing are not enough. New Bethany has wraparound systems that surround our neighbors with hope and support. We create connections with businesses who volunteer or provide in-kind services. We join with health networks, faith and community groups who are no strangers to rolling up their sleeves in a crisis. We demonstrate concern for our neighbors by finding the right fit for each person and group across the continuum of care.

**Principle #6:** Prevention. New Bethany addresses the issue at hand while always having an eye toward underlying causes. Our team of case workers and residential advisors are skilled in asking the right questions to our residents and guests in order to discover exactly what interventions might solve a problem. Beyond that, New Bethany staff speaks with public officials and community leaders about how policies can impact and change the lives of the people we serve. Prevention comes in all forms, from individual actions to policy decisions.

We need your help to continue to carry these principles forward through our work. Thank you for being such caring neighbors and supporters of New Bethany. If you never donated to Spring Against Hunger, this might be your year. And if you usually donate a set amount, please consider a modest increase.

With Thanks,

Marc Rittle  
Executive Director