

# Ex-offenders face fear of having no where to go

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Editor's note: This is the second of a multi-part series on the changing faces of homelessness in this region and the effort to obtain an accurate count of the homeless population.

By STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS/Staff

Being in jail is scary but so is getting out, declared Frankie Frazier, who has been incarcerated and released multiple times, most recently as a habitual offender.

Frazier, who admits a longtime drinking problem and his responsibility for his actions, is supporting efforts to provide housing and other stabilizing services to ex-offenders.

The stress of not knowing where you'll be able to stay after release is immense, said Frazier. "It's sorta scary. I didn't know where I could stay. It's a lot of stress. You just don't know which way to go. I didn't know if I'd drink again."

Now sober, Frazier gratefully acknowledges an aunt who allowed him to move in with her. "If not for my aunt, I'd probably be passed out in a ditch."

In jail, he said, he met numerous people with nowhere to go, their families no longer wanting them or unavailable.

"I saw some of them try to hang themselves with a bed sheet," Frazier said, illustrating the tension of the unknown.

Frazier attributes the difficulties of finding a place to stay, food and jobs to the high recidivism rate. He admits that some people would end up back in jail regardless, but if many could have assistance and structured support they might not end up back in the same crowd and back in jail. "Some will go back no matter what. Some appreciate a roof over their head, a bite to eat."

Andy Kegley, executive director of H.O.P.E. Inc., a regional non-profit addressing poverty issues, concurs. He noted that many inmates are released with only a plan for the first night's housing. Individuals are discharged back into the community, he said, without a long-term plan. Depending on the type of crime, Kegley said, the ex-offenders may not be eligible for subsidized housing.

Kegley quoted a Max Meadows pastor who works with ex-offenders. The pastor noted that with job, housing and health-care struggles, jail "beats maybe being on the street."

Kegley added, "It's too easy to end up back in jail."

The high rates of recidivism, Kegley said, carry a high price for taxpayers. He projected the daily per inmate cost at one regional jail to be \$60, a fee that must be paid by localities.

Kegley acknowledged that housing for ex-offenders is not a high priority for many people. "I understand ex-offender housing is not popular, but local governments pay the bill if they go back to jail."

In Wythe County, he noted, the board of supervisors is looking at the issue. "The county is understanding that they can be proactive," he said.

Getting a number of discharged inmates in the regional population is difficult, said Kegley, who added that nationally it's about 2 percent. "We think there's a huge number of people in the region."

Pat Helton, the executive director of the regional Crossroads Shelter for the homeless in Wytheville, concurs.

Describing the problem, she said, "Public housing for individuals with felonies is scarce to non-existent."

Helton noted that the federal Housing and Urban Development doesn't prohibit individuals with criminal histories from renting or leasing, but many individual complexes do.

H.O.P.E. and Crossroads Shelter are just two agencies represented in a diverse Continuum of Care that is working to address homeless issues. Kegley said the continuum is trying to tap into stimulus funds made available through the Second Chance Act to address housing issues.

To help get a more accurate tally, the continuum is participating in the annual count of all the region's homeless. The total figures help determine future funding. Ex-offenders who are homeless or are living with a family member or friend and individuals who are homeless because of other circumstances in Smyth, Bland, Wythe, Carroll and Grayson counties and the city of Galax are asked to call before Jan. 30 to be counted. The numbers to call are toll free 877-818-8680 Ext. 210 or in Wythe County 228-6280 Ext. 210.

Callers' information will be kept private and confidential.

Frazier is working the Continuum of Care to help promote the need for ex-offender housing.

In a testimony he wrote for the organization's use, he wrote, "Being released from a rigidly controlled environment to the street where few constraints exist is a shock to anyone released from confinement...."

Frazier knows life can be better. He was married for 32 years with two children. "I had a brand new home... the whole nine yards. You've heard of rags to riches in 24 hours? I went the other way faster."

Frazier also knows how desperate life can feel. He said he tried suicide five times. The last time he was arrested and jailed, Frazier said, followed a wreck in which he tried to take his life.

Being sober, attending church and having two granddaughters as part of his life help Frazier. "I'm not where I'd like to be, but I have a whole different attitude. I'd like to help someone else," he said.

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