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UAAA 2019 ALUMNI AWARDS NOMINATION FORM

This nomination is for Distinguished Alumnus

NOMINATOR INFORMATION

Name: Philip T. Carter

UAHS grad. yr.: 1956
Email:
Home Address: 3607 Prestwick Ct., Columbus, OH 43220
Phone:

NOMINEE INFORMATION

Name: Kent R. Beittel

UAHS grad. yr.: Class of 1965, but did not graduate from UAHS because family moved out of Columbus area at the end of his junior year when his father changed employment, as explained in accompanying nomination document.
Home address: 818 Carpenter St., Columbus, OH 43206
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— 2019 DISTINGUISHED ALUMNUS AWARD NOMINATION —

Kent R. Beittel, the nominee, was a member of the UAHS class of 1965.*

For nearly 36 years, with Kent as its first and only director ever, The Open Shelter, Inc., an Ohio non-profit corporation, has served the homeless in Columbus, first in Franklinton—with a walk-in shelter in 1983, and later with overnight housing—until 2004, when policy disagreements with the Community Shelter Board had led to a crippling loss of funding and the leased shelter building was razed to clear the way for development in the area; and thereafter, since 2006, as a downtown day shelter, first at the Trinity Episcopal Church and now at the St. John’s Evangelical Protestant Church at 61 E. Mound St.

His wife, Mary, worked closely with him at both the Franklinton and downtown shelters from 1996 until her untimely death in 2017 after a prolonged struggle with cancer.

Until 2004, the Franklinton shelter helped over 20,000 homeless men, women, and children, with beds for 100 or so men each night, employment and medical services, nightly meals, referrals to alcohol and drug treatment, and in obtaining government benefits.

The current downtown day shelter, offering much-needed, one-stop shopping for the homeless, has a 2019 cash budget of $324,300, supplemented by in-kind donations of food, clothing, and other necessities valued at more than $1,000,000. In 2018 the shelter had 38,426 new and repeat visits by persons in need, served 9,043 dinners, distributed more than 125,317 sack lunches and to-go meals, assisted with applications for housing and in obtaining government benefits, furnished donated clothing, tents, sleeping bags, and other necessities, and provided outreach at the year-round outdoor homeless camps where hundreds of persons stay on any given night.
Losing the Franklinton shelter building in 2004 was a defining, almost impossible moment for Kent. Almost, but not impossible because Kent, typically of him, refused to turn his back and walk away. As The Columbus Dispatch’s Ray Paprocki reported (in an article included at pages 8 – 12 of the nomination documents):

Kent Beittel emerged in the late 1980s as the city’s most prominent advocate for the homeless.

Not media-shy, he rarely disappointed reporters looking for a lively quote, and his seemingly endless advocacy made the Open Shelter the most recognized homeless facility in central Ohio.

At times, he burned with frustration over what he viewed as a lack of action by various social-service agencies.

“I have a hard time being patient because I know their names,” he said then of the 100 or so men who slept nightly on mattresses on the concrete Open Shelter floor.

In the late 1990s, the [Columbus] Community Shelter Board—supported by the political and civic structure—reshaped its approach to homelessness by seeking permanent housing solutions, a practice that later won national praise.

Kent and Mary, who joined him in 1996 to handle the administrative grind and deal with the social-service bureaucracies, fiercely fought the plan, which didn’t include the type of place they operated: Ask no questions; accept everyone.

The clash caused an ugly and public split between the shelter board and the Open Shelter, which at the time was based on the West Side in a former furniture warehouse near COSI Columbus.

Without financial support from the board, the Open Shelter lost $445,000—more than a third of its budget. It hung on for five years, but its lease on the building expired in 2004, and desperate fundraising attempts to start a new facility fell short.

The battle left Kent battered and exhausted. The place was his purpose; its failures were his failures.

Yet the son of a Methodist preacher who came of age during the civil-rights era pledged to carry on.

“God brought me here to turn my life over to these people,” he said at the time. “Sometimes, you pray, believe and go on.”
Kent, with Mary, did “believe and go on” by opening the downtown day shelter in 2006. It has been remarkably successful in meeting some of the most urgent needs of an exploding homeless population, many of whom are living 24 hours a day “on the streets,” sleeping in makeshift outdoor homeless camps (with an estimated 600 or more in cold weather), parks, woods, abandoned buildings, under bridges, and on railroad property.

Why, you may ask, continue after having to close the Franklinton shelter? Kent has acknowledged that if The Open Shelter were like other social-service organizations, it would maybe have made sense to have tried merging with a larger agency. “But,” he has said, having in mind that The Open Shelter asks only for mutual respect by those it serves, “this place is peculiar,” and there would have been no place elsewhere for those who can’t or won’t adhere to the strict conditions and rules required by the other local shelters and social-service agencies.

There’s much more to be said. With that in mind, the nomination documents (numbered consecutively at the bottom right-hand corner of each page) include copies of four very well-done newspaper and magazine articles elaborating on Kent’s work, Mary’s role, and the increasingly urgent and alarming local homeless crisis. Together, these show convincingly how exceptional his work has been, and how deserving he is of recognition as a distinguished UA alumnus. For additional information, see The Open Shelter’s website at theopenshelter.org.

There is one additional circumstance that you may or may not wish to consider. This year is not a class reunion year for Kent, his next being 2020. I had originally intended to wait until then to nominate him, taking into account that the nomination form specifies that “Special consideration will be given to nominees celebrating a reunion year,” but have now changed my mind. Kent is now undergoing chemotherapy and other treatment at The James for a recent recurrence this year of lung cancer first discovered in late 2017 or early 2018, and treated in
2018. With the recurrence, there is a risk that he will not survive until a nomination next year can be made and acted on, so I have decided to nominate this year. I am not, please understand, suggesting how the board should deal with Kent’s nomination, but only informing you of something you may or may not wish to consider in weighing his candidacy against competing candidates with a 2019 reunion year.

Finally, I am a member of The Open Shelter’s board of trustees, and also a volunteer and donor, but this nomination is mine personally, based on what I know of Kent and his work for the homeless, and regardless of my role as a trustee, volunteer, and donor.

Philip T. Carter, UAHS class of 1956

*Kent didn’t graduate with his class of 1965 because, after finishing his junior year in 1964, his family moved out of Upper Arlington when his father, the senior minister at Riverside Methodist Church, accepted an appointment at a church outside the Columbus area. His junior-year class picture from the 1964 Norwester is at page 6 of the nomination documents.
Couple continues decades-long battle to help Columbus-area homeless

http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/life_and_entertainment/2012/07/31/the-good-fight.html

By Ray Paprocki, The Columbus Dispatch
Posted Jul 31, 2012 at 12:01 AM Updated Jul 31, 2012 at 12:20 PM

The office of Kent and Mary Beittel looks more like a storage unit. Their desks butt against the back wall amid stacks of cardboard boxes jammed with supplies and cabinets packed with children’s games such as Don’t Spill the Beans.

Anyone who knows Kent, the longtime leader of the Open Shelter, would appreciate the irony: He has spilled his fair share of beans while helping the hardest of the hard-core homeless for almost 30 years.

In fact, on one July morning, he is questioning a decision by the Community Shelter Board -- which drives policy and programming for homeless issues in Franklin County -- to tie a portion of the funding for a shelter to the average number of nights that someone uses the facility. The goal: to get folks into housing quickly.

Although the issue doesn’t directly affect the Open Shelter, which offers services but no beds, he feels compelled to comment:

“Where are the people supposed to go? There’s not enough housing; there’s not enough jobs. The assumption is you’re supposed to be more motivated to move faster. Move faster to where? To what? I don’t know what they are smoking.”

A commotion occurs in the hallway of the second-floor space that the Open Shelter leases from St. John’s Evangelical Protestant Church on E. Mound Street. Then a man exclaims, “Call 911!”

No one seems alarmed. The fellow, it turns out, has a flair for the dramatic.

An angry outburst by another guy, however, draws immediate attention:

“I don’t give a f--- about going to jail. . . . You’re not getting in my business.”

Mary motions to her husband to stay put as she leaves to investigate. He goes out anyway a few minutes later. When the upset man sees him, he calmly says hello, then returns to his rant.

“Don’t make me tell you that you can’t come back,” Mary says as she persuades him to leave before he causes more trouble. “Be careful going down the stairs.”
After the couple return to their office, he says: “We aren’t always nice. But we are fair, consistent and predictable.”

And almost always welcoming.

“You can’t burn your bridge with us,” Kent says. “We are the safety net under the safety net.”

The vital role that the Open Shelter plays for a certain segment of the homeless community isn’t lost on Sue Villilo, executive director of Faith Mission, the homeless shelter run by Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio.

“For those people,” Villilo says, “Kent is their lifeline.”

An advocate emerges

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A battle continues

Today, Kent Beittel is still stick-figure thin, still pulls his hair back into a ponytail and still sports a beard (speckled with gray).

He is also no less provocative or poignant. A guest sermon titled “Eskimos Have 47 Words for Snow” delivered at St. John’s prompted a standing ovation from the congregation.

“That doesn’t happen,” says Mary Yost, a member of the church governing board.

Although it stopped housing the homeless, the Open Shelter remained open -- relocating Downtown to Trinity Episcopal Church before moving to St. John’s in 2006.

Operating on a budget of just more than $200,000, it depends primarily on donations and serves as a one-stop shop of sorts for people in need. In 2011, the shelter logged more than 31,000 ” encounters,” or new and repeat visits; served 14,512 dinners; and prepared more than 123,000 sack lunches and to-go meals.

Among other services, it helps people complete applications for housing and Social Security; does outreach at homeless camps (about 650 people live on the street on any given night in Franklin County, Kent estimates); and provides clothing, shoes and toilet paper along with sleeping mats woven out of plastic grocery bags by volunteers.

In addition, the Beittels offer plenty of tough love, guidance and emotional support.

Ricky Estep has lived on and off the streets for 17 years. The married father of a 3-year-old girl depends on Mary, he says, to help him obtain his disability check from Social Security.

“I can tell she cares about me,” the 35-year-old says. “She hands my baby girl toys. She paid for my daughter’s medication. She is a like a mom to me.”

Michelle Heritage, executive director of the Community Shelter Board, doesn’t always agree with Kent on homeless issues, such as the new policy tying funds to overnight stays. Still, she praises the “valuable” role he plays in trying to find solutions to a
growing problem during tough economic times -- especially his penchant for asking hard questions.

A decade since the high-profile falling-out, the Beittels are receiving recognition for their work, almost as if their careers have reached the stage of elder statesmen.

ComFest officials this year named them “honored activists.” In February, Kent was nominated for a Jefferson Award for community service. And WSNY (94.7 FM) selected Mary as one of its “20 Outstanding Women” in 2010.

Villilo recalled a meeting with the Beittels last summer at the Jury Room when a waiter came to the table to tell them: “That man who just left paid for your lunch as a way to say thank you to Kent for all he has done for the community.”

A couple meets

Kent Beittel and Mary Casbaro met in 1980, when she was a waitress at Bun’s Restaurant in Delaware and he and his boss at the United Way would conduct business at one of her tables.

“They were notorious for being terrible tippers,” she says.

They began to date and soon moved in together, raising a blended family of five children before marrying in 1988.

She is the ice to her husband’s fire. When he gets angry about things he can’t control, she tells him: “Get over it. It is what it is.”

Their only distraction, it seems, is their extended family, including nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

“It is good to re-immerse yourself in that because the day sucked,” Kent says.

As the couple talk about their lives, they bring to mind an Elvis Costello line: "There’s a story in your voice, both by damage and by choice.”

Kent doesn’t disagree.

“We have both paid dearly and are unbelievably blessed,” he says. “We have known some of these people for more than 20 years -- seen them without housing, with housing, through treatment. Then we arrange their funerals, and the families say, ‘Thank you.’

“There’s no way that can’t both be painful and uplifting at the same time.”

The work goes on
The emotional roller coaster has taken a toll. So has time.

Kent is 64; Mary is 60.

“You fear that you can’t keep it up,” Kent says.

Still, they have no plans to slow down: If not they, who will help those depending on the couple to make life better -- or at least try?

One woman they’ve known for years doesn’t regularly take her medications.

“When she doesn’t, she gets interesting,” says Kent, recalling a recent such occasion.

“The other day, she was having conversations with people other people here couldn’t see. She leaves. Five minutes later, we get a call. . . . She is at the COTA bus stop on High Street by the courthouse. She was being interesting.

“I spent 20 minutes trying to talk her down. I turned to the ring of police standing there waiting and say, ‘I can’t talk her down.’ So I stand there and watch -- the paddy wagon, handcuffs, screaming and crying. Now, we don’t know where she is.

“It all got started when she grabbed hold of a box of a woman walking down the street with a 6-year-old. She is a hoarder. She wasn’t after them, but no one knows that.”

Kent and Mary do.

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Ailing couple, longtime advocates for homeless, prepare for life after Open Shelter

By Rita Price
The Columbus Dispatch
Posted Apr 2, 2017 at 5:19 AM
Updated Apr 2, 2017 at 5:19 AM

They still share every workday.

Kent Beittel commits the hours to memory as best he can and then takes them home to his wife, Mary. She remains eager to experience the successes and frustrations, the moments of grace and love and side-splitting laughter, that invariably mark a shift at the Open Shelter.

"In a lot of ways, Mary and I are one person," Kent said. "And that's been — it still is — a fine thing."

He speaks of her eloquently but not without difficulty, and he doesn’t apologize for his tears. The couple worked side by side for years, battling public officials, business titans and other nonprofit leaders as they became perhaps the city's best-known advocates for the homeless.

Along the way, "We built a family," said Kent, 69, the longtime executive director of the Open Shelter. "We've raised kids and grandkids. We've grown."

He and Mary, 64, had barely finished celebrating his recovery from a stroke when she was diagnosed in 2015 with cancer. The follicular lymphoma has progressed despite treatment, invading her spinal fluid and her brain. She hasn’t been to work in the shelter office since last spring, but no one wants to move her black sweater from the back of her chair.

Kent thought about leaving, too.

"I asked her if I needed to just walk away, and I thought she was going to kick me," Kent said. "We spent our lives doing this, and we are not to abandon it. She
is adamant that I see this transition through.”

Plenty of times in its 34-year history, the Open Shelter has stared down an uncertain future. Most prominent was the shelter’s closure in 2004, when the city-owned building in Franklinton was razed to clear the way for development on the Scioto Peninsula. Bitter policy disagreements with the Community Shelter Board also had led to a crippling loss of funding.

No longer able to function as an overnight shelter, the agency moved to a temporary home Downtown at Trinity Episcopal Church. From there the Open Shelter went to St. John’s Evangelical Protestant Church on East Mound Street, where it has operated since 2006 as a day program without beds.

Through it all, the philosophy hasn’t changed: Everyone, no matter their demons or vices, is welcome. Mary wants Kent to groom successors and supporters who will keep the doors open and hew to that pastoral approach.

“There are a lot of good examples of faithful husband-and-wife teams in the Bible,” said the Rev. Richard Burnett of Trinity Episcopal Church. “But the one that keeps coming back to me is not biblical but a powerful literary image. Mary’s the extraordinarily wise Sancho Panza to Kent’s Don Quixote.”

Together, Burnett said, they dream impossible dreams.

**Serving ‘guests,’ not clients**

Jamie Hammond collapsed at Mary Beittel’s feet. He’d walked and crawled from his place in a homeless camp, determined to reach the only people he trusted to care whether he lived or died. He was sick from drugs, exhausted from living outside and dangerously ill with appendicitis.

“The last thing I remember was grabbing her ankle,” Hammond said, the decade-old memory plain as yesterday. “I can tell you exactly what she wore: beige sweater, beige dress pants and beige alligator-leather high heels. I just laid my head on her shoe. I was at peace.”

Nearly every day since, Hammond has turned up to volunteer or to provide some measure of service at the shelter. “I just turned 50 in January, thanks to them,” he said. “They saved my life.”
Miss Mary, as Hammond and others refer to Kent’s wife, has navigated the chaos of a city shelter with humor and steel. She’s quick to laugh and all but impossible to intimidate.

Kent has held his breath as she stood between towering, angry men poised “to tear each other apart.” Mary put her hands on each and gently separated them. “Everyone seemed to know,” Kent said. “You did not mess with someone who cared about you that much.”

Many of the 160 or so people who visit the shelter daily for food, resources and friendship are in the grip of addiction, despair and mental illness. Outbursts are common but usually not serious. Unlike most such agencies, the Open Shelter never has had security guards.

“Mary is convinced that mothers have a way of helping you understand that they can love you at the same time they’re telling you you’re full of s—,” Kent said. “That’s a helpful skill around here.”

Once, Kent said, a man told Mary he was going to cut her. “You’re welcome to come back and try in a week because that’s how long you’re barred from here,” she told him.

Dozens of other shelter “guests” — the Beittels don’t call them clients — quickly let the man know that he was the one in danger.

Mary enjoys reminiscences of the shelter’s colorful past. But the cancer has stolen her short-term memory and left her weak from chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Kent tells her about each day knowing she’ll have forgotten it the next.

Every so often, staff members put cards out in the day room for guests to sign. “I take a big envelope of them home to her,” Kent said, along with the best butter-pecan ice cream he can find. “It’s amazing how many guests here remind us, perpetually, that we’re being prayed for.”

All are welcome

If the Open Shelter were like other social-service organizations, Kent said, maybe it would make sense at this point to try to merge with a larger agency.
"But this place is peculiar," he said.

Sheli Mathias nodded. "It sure is."

Two years ago, Mathias, 49, was a new volunteer at the Open Shelter. The mother of three teenagers had learned about it through her church, Peace United Methodist in Pickerington. She was fascinated.

"She came back and came back," Kent said. "Interestingly, God provides." As he reduces his schedule to care for Mary, the like-minded Mathias fills the gap.

Her name is now on an Open Shelter business card as the executive assistant to the director. She's working with Kent to push ahead and to strengthen the shelter's financial connection to the religious community, which has long provided material support.

Although the shelter's razor-thin annual budget is just $240,000, in-kind donations — food, sleeping bags, personal-care items and more — total some $1.4 million. It needs more cash to offset fundraising declines and to cover staffing expenses that have risen as the Beittels can no longer maintain the same level of duties.

Kent has not set a retirement date and vows "to protect Solomon and Harry," the shelter's only other full-time employees. Solomon Dean and Harry Yeprem Jr. have been at the Open Shelter for nearly 20 years.

"We could not do what we do if Solomon were not there, and if Harry were not there, doing what they do," Mathias said.

Dean's voice booms in the hallway for hours each day, calling out from the list of homeless men and women lined up for care packages and other services. "Mary taught me about taking a breath and walking away, about how not to let anyone get me off my square," he said. "She taught me how to work in the gray areas."

Without the Open Shelter, Mary and Kent believe, there would be no place for those who can't or won't adhere to the strict conditions and requirements of other shelters and social-service agencies. The Beittels ask only for mutual respect.
Kent gestures toward a person in Dean’s line. “He comes because his mother doesn’t understand why he's getting breast implants,” Kent said. “He comes to eat and to deal with his sadness.”

Another homeless man peers into the office at Mary’s empty chair. “Tell her Mohamed said hi.”

When someone asks how she’s doing, and someone always does, Kent manages a smile.

“It’s going to be a long road,” he says. “But I’m sure we’re on the right road.”

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Mary Beittel’s love and service to the homeless celebrated

By Rita Price
The Columbus Dispatch

Posted Aug 28, 2017 at 8:49 PM Updated Aug 28, 2017 at 8:49 PM

As he made his way into the red-carpeted sanctuary, Ernest Spratt thought back to the place where Mary Beittel found him. He was alone and cold and staying under a bridge.

“She wanted me to live,” he said, smiling through his tears. “She was a beautiful person.”

Spratt, 66 and no longer homeless, was among the gloriously hodgepodge crowd of mourners who packed Broad Street United Methodist Church on Monday evening to celebrate Beittel’s life and her decades of work on behalf of the city’s neediest residents.

Public officials, business leaders, family members and people who sleep on the street — some of them still carrying their belongings on their backs — sat side by side. Afterward, as Mary would have wanted, they shared a meal.

“This is what a church is supposed to look like,” said the Rev. Deborah Stevens. “All God’s children.”

Beittel, 65, died of cancer on Aug. 19. She and her husband, Kent, ran the Open Shelter for more than 30 years, persevering through public-policy battles and financial crises, hanging on after the bulldozing of their Franklinton site and two relocations.

“Mary never missed a beat,” said James Hammond, a shelter volunteer who credits Mary with saving his life. “And she did it all in her red lipstick and heels.”

Attending the memorial was important to so many of the Open Shelter’s current and former “guests,” Kent said, many of whom were amazed at how easily Mary had seen their humanity, even when they couldn’t.

“Part of the beauty of this process — part of what frees guests to care about Mary — is the knowledge that they were respected every minute,” he said.

At first, Kent said, he’d thought about holding the service early and closing the shelter. “I had that thought for about 13 seconds before the back of my head exploded and I heard her saying, ’No! That’s not how it’s done.’”

Jeff Camp would have come no matter the time. “My grandkids would not have known a very decent Christmas without her,” he said. “I can’t give enough, can’t show enough, thanks.”
Alli Smith said her “Nana” had superhuman powers that allowed her to be strong and gentle at once. “Just be nice, but stand firm for what is right,” Mary would say. “And watch both ends.”

The Rev. Lou Seipel said Mary put things other ways, too. “Do no harm, and take no s***,” Seipel said to laughter. “She said it; I didn’t. And if it had been thought of earlier, it could have been scripture.”

Seipel said the Beittels’ relationship and shoulder-to-shoulder work — they toiled in the same office, just feet apart — also was inspiration to many.

“You can’t think of Mary without Kent or Kent without Mary. ‘To the moon and back,’ they told each other,” Seipel said. “Their love defied description. And even if I could describe it, I couldn’t get through it.”

Sheli Mathias, now an assistant director at the Open Shelter, told the gathering that she’ll do her best “to earn and preserve the gift that Mary and Kent created. With this change, there will be lots of sameness.”

After the service, Kent, 69, walked among the tables in the dining hall, talking and waiting while people finished meals. Some of the hungry went for seconds. Mary, who loved to feed the homeless — or anyone, for that matter — would have been pleased, he said.

“We, Mary and I, are always the last to eat,” Kent said. “That’s the way it still will be.”

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The problem often appears monolithic, entrenched and clouded by stereotypes. A closer look reveals an alarming spike in numbers, a system struggling to help—and the human face of unrelenting need.

By Chris Gaitten

This is the story of a woman with a coat at least two sizes too large. She’s young—20, 25 tops. I see her waiting across the street at the intersection of High and State. She stops me in the crosswalk. She doesn’t want money, just food. I debate giving her the $2 in my wallet and going on my way, but I know that a couple singles won’t buy her a meal.

“What do you want?” I ask.

Anything, she says. “I’ve been eating out of the trash.”

We walk to Pizza Rustica, a block away. She orders cheesecake and Mountain Dew, and after a little prodding, a few slices of pepperoni. She’s worried about asking for too much. We find a table.

She left her small hometown outside Columbus a couple of weeks ago, and this is her first real trip to Downtown. She says it wistfully, imagining a world where everything turned out better. She came to find work, but her possessions were stolen and she can’t get a job without an ID. The
shelters are full, she says, so she was placed on a waiting list with 39 people ahead of her. She’s in the top 15 now. A tent off Broad Street has served as her makeshift home. I give her my last piece of pizza and she puts it in a takeout box with the remnants of hers. There’s no cheesecake left. She loves cheesecake, she says.

She gets up to leave. She doesn’t like being out late because Broad Street gets dangerous the further west she goes. Someone gave her pepper spray and she clutches it when she walks alone. She thanks me for at least the fifth time and then disappears.

This is her story, but there are many others like her—so many it’s hard to fathom.

**A Growing Dilemma**

Government agencies endlessly quantify homelessness, and yet there’s no definitive figure for how many people are homeless. What seems inescapable, though, is that it’s growing unabated in Columbus, defying national trends. The Community Shelter Board’s 2016 single-day, point-in-time count reported the number of homeless had increased 22 percent since 2011, though that method struggles to capture people who want to avoid detection. A separate report shows that the city’s shelters served 10,558 people in fiscal year 2016, 40 percent more than five years ago. The numbers for women have increased 50 percent, and family use shot up 68 percent. By contrast, the number of homeless people nationwide has decreased 13.7 percent since 2010, and family homelessness has decreased 19.5 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Concerned by the increase, the shelter board and the Columbus Foundation reached out to research firm Abt and Associates and helped create the Task Force to Prevent Family Homelessness, helmed by Franklin County Commissioner Marilyn Brown. Those combined efforts revealed systemic problems: a loss of $72 million in annual public benefits for the county’s poorest residents since 2001; a shrinking rental market;
extensive waits for low-income housing; and disproportionate numbers of African-Americans using the shelter system. Sources for this story say that homelessness is also up among youth and young adults, and the opiate epidemic is intensifying the problem.

"There are more people on the streets than we've ever seen," says Kent Beittel, founder of the Open Shelter and a longtime Columbus advocate for the homeless. "It's increasing all the way across the board and it's going to continue to increase because, as far as I can tell, no one is doing anything to end homelessness, in spite of all the PR. What we're doing is we're dealing with how to help you overcome your homelessness. But that doesn't change the fact that in Columbus, Ohio, we are pushing people into the street faster than we are getting them off. That is the dilemma."

Navigating Shelter

Homeless shelters were once like a loose system of flophouses, but no more. Antonio Caffey, the director of Friends of the Homeless shelter in Olde Towne East, says it's not "three hots and a cot" these days. It's a housing program now—an incredibly complex one involving a vast group of organizations operating within a dizzying web of regulations. In Columbus, this system is directed mostly by the Community Shelter Board, which oversees planning, funding and evaluating homeless programs for 19 provider organizations, including the city's shelters. The shelter board adheres to the Housing First philosophy, which states that people can't address other problems without the stability of a home. It aims to move people quickly from shelters, or even directly from the street, into permanent housing and then offer supportive services to maintain stability.

Shelters can be accessed only through the centralized Homeless Hotline, which is run by HandsOn Central Ohio. Representatives with HandsOn attempt to divert as many people as possible from the crowded shelter system by connecting them with other resources or suggesting alternatives, like staying with family, to protect the scarce supply of beds.
HandsOn CEO Ernest Perry says that about 26 percent of single adults and 48 percent of families are currently diverted.

In the winter, the shelter system enters overflow, and more beds are added so that anyone who needs one gets one. There’s typically a waiting list for single adults during the rest of the year. Shelter board CEO Michelle Heritage says that last year’s average backlog was 29 people for men and 36 for women;

Sue Villilo, the executive director of Faith Mission, says that generally it’s a two- to four-day wait for men, but as long as a couple of weeks for women.

The shelter board promised to do away with waiting lists before the opening of its newest shelter, known as Van Buren, which was originally intended for single adults. But family homelessness pushed the YWCA Family Center far beyond capacity, forcing the board to add a new family section. The system received another shock when the Van Buren women’s section opened. The wait list at the time was 50 women, says Sue Darby, the executive director of the Downtown district YMCA, which operates Van Buren. But within eight weeks of opening, it was housing 300 women—250 more than originally expected. Men were forced to wait another few months.

“Just very clearly: The shelter board hates waiting lists,” Heritage says. “I think that human beings that need shelter and services should get it right away, and this is fully a resource issue. So if we had adequate resources, we would eliminate those waiting lists immediately.”

Heritage estimates the addition of another 100 beds a night would meet the need. She says, however, that the shelter board’s preference isn’t to add more shelters, which she likens to emergency rooms. “Shelter does not solve homelessness at all. Not at all,” she continues. Shelter provides a safe and dignified environment, Heritage says, but services are the key to eliminating homelessness. That means more case managers, called navigators. The system employs about 30 now, and she estimates needing at least 50.
None of this surprises Beitell, the shelter board’s most vocal critic since its inception 31 years ago. He says the board consistently underestimates the homeless population and therefore plans based on bad data. His Open Shelter was once a part of the system, but a public falling out with the board ultimately led to the loss of his government funding and eventually the building itself. They became an example, he says. “There were literally people who were told, “This could happen to you.””

Don Strasser, the co-chair of the Columbus Coalition for the Homeless, says that because providers are funded in part by the shelter board, it prevents them from speaking candidly. “They really have to be very careful because they’re very fearful that there will be repercussions if they are too critical.”

The Open Shelter now operates in St. John’s church Downtown, providing meals, clothing, supplies, outreach and advocacy, but no beds. Despite lingering acrimony, Beitell is quick to praise the shelter board for all the good it’s done—addressing family homelessness, creating lots of permanent supportive housing for the homeless with disabilities—but he has a problem with the one-size-fits-all approach, resolutely adhering to solutions that help many people but leave others behind. Heritage balks at the notion that the board is overly rigid in its services, saying that providers offer a wide range of programs, though she acknowledges that money from HUD, a major funding source, comes with strict rules.

Sandy Stephenson believes in Housing First, just not for everyone. The director of integrated health care for Southeast Inc., which runs Friends of the Homeless, says she wishes there was a “goodness of fit” model instead, in which some people are housed within the ideal 30-day timeframe, while others are given up to six months to address problems first. Right now, she’s seeing more people placed into housing that they can’t maintain long term.

Darby witnesses the same thing at Van Buren, where families are repeating through the system two or three times. “They don’t have the tools in the tool chest to stay stably housed.”
A Tale of Two Houses

The Holy Family Soup Kitchen in Franklinton is a hub of outreach on a Thursday morning in January. The Mount Carmel Street Medicine team’s Mobile Medical Coach is parked in the lot to dispense free primary care; it is just one of several agencies on-site. There are a great number of people helping to fight homelessness at every turn, and yet they always seem to be eclipsed by the need.

Inside Holy Family, Tamar Harvey sits across a table from one of the four Mount Carmel nurses working the triage room that all the patients must visit before they enter the RV-turned-mobile-clinic outside. Tamar walks with a profound limp, dragging his right leg behind him, the most visible symptom of a stroke that affected his entire right side and caused a traumatic brain injury. He’s shy and speaks in a gravelly rumble.

He was homeless for more than two years and spent the last year of that time sleeping in front of a church at Fifth Avenue and High Street. He spoke to some construction workers there every day; he thinks they placed a call on his behalf. Tamar then spent about six weeks in a shelter before being placed in permanent supportive housing nearby in Franklinton. He’s been there slightly over a year, and he just received his Section 8 voucher to move anywhere that will take him. He wants to find a place near Ohio State to get away from the gunshots he frequently hears. Tamar is a success story.

David Palmer lives at the other end of the spectrum. He goes by Vern and is all kinetic energy. “Selfie!” he yells, throwing his arms around me and Mount Carmel’s media relations person while mugging for our photographer. “I made that look good,” he says as he gets up. Vern tells me he has no filter several minutes after making that patently obvious.

He’s sitting in a provisional exam room in the cab of the RV, talking to a Street Medicine nurse practitioner named Jackie White. Usually he sleeps in his brother’s van, which is for sale. He admits that finding housing is hard for him. “I don’t do shelters,” he says. “I like my blade.” He pulls a
small pocketknife from inside his coat and explains that he uses it for eating; he has no teeth. He doesn’t like having his things taken from him by shelter staff, and knives are prohibited.

He was homeless for six years the first time around. He was eventually moved into Southpoint Place, another permanent supportive housing complex. It’s on the South End, unfortunately, and he’s more comfortable with the West Side. He tried, he says, but ultimately it didn’t work out, and he’s been back on the land since last spring. He says he was told he could have refused the placement, but then he’d still be homeless. Also, if someone refuses they’re pushed to the bottom of the waiting list, White says. So Vern is hopeful that Maryhaven’s outreach team will help him find housing today. But not that hopeful.

White has been working with Mount Carmel outreach for more than 16 years. In addition to the mobile coach, she and the Street Medicine team also take medication and supplies to the homeless camps around the city each week. She saw more alcohol use in camps in the past, but that’s been surpassed by heroin. She’s seeing more adolescents now, too.

“Research tells us that within two years, a quarter of youth who age out of foster care without support from mom or dad become homeless,” says Ann Bischoff, the director of OSU Star House, a drop-in center for the homeless between ages 14 and 24. She estimates there are about 1,500 homeless transitional-age youth in Columbus, and about half came from the foster care system. They’re reluctant to use the shelters because of the preconceived notion that the adult population is dangerous.

The Street Medicine team tries to link everyone in the camps to housing opportunities whenever they can. They give out the hotline number to call for shelter beds on cold nights. “We don’t give up on people,” White says. “We keep reminding them that there’s a better life for them, and we really try to encourage them to get the services that they need.”

Letters, Needles and Demons

Inside the Franklin Station building, social workers and volunteers assign
alphabetical letters to the drug users who come to the Safe Point needle program seeking sterile syringes—the first person through the door is A, the second is B and so on. At 8:40 in the morning, only 10 minutes after the doors open, letters A through F are already sitting around a conference table inside the clinic, run by Southeast Inc. Some are homeless, but not all of them, and everyone I see appears to be a heroin user, some of them deeply addicted.

I was invited by Bela Koe-Krompecher, the clinical director of housing with the Downtown YMCA, to witness this scene on the West Side, where it's like a “heroin-explosion bomb went off,” he says. Equitas Health operates the Safe Point program twice a week in the Short North and once a week here in Franklin, with the goal of promoting safer drug use and fighting the spread of disease while offering access to treatment.

Every person through the door waits to be called into a private room with one of the nurses to get instruction and needles. Koe-Krompecher sits at the conference table with his laptop ready, offering social service triage of sorts. You need Medicaid? What about legal help? A bag of food from the YMCA pantry down the hall? He also offers to connect the homeless with the shelter system, though his effort is half-hearted. He already knows what most of them will say.

“Our shelters suck here, man,” one person complains to no one in particular. Koe-Krompecher says the thing he hears most at Safe Point is, “How can I get housing?” He tells them they have to call into the Homeless Hotline, and they typically decline.

“In their mind, it's not safe for them. They're vulnerable,” Koe-Krompecher says. “They're not allowed to have needles. It's impractical. It's not inviting. I don't know how you get around it. I really don't because I don't know all the technicalities. I just know what we're doing isn't.”

Antonio Caffey, the director of Friends of the Homeless, says that many heroin users aren't able to deal with the amount of control they lose by
coming into the shelters. Some still make it in, he says, and gestures toward the overdose-reversing Narcan kit by the shelter’s front desk.

Malcolm Henry, a nurse with Southeast’s PATH outreach program, says that some of his clients tell him they stay away from shelter because they’re trying to beat their own addictions and heroin is easily accessible there, despite the shelters’ best efforts. Kythryn Carr Hurd, the vice president of clinical services with the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board of Franklin County, says the board has heard from the YWCA Family Shelter that many people are coming in with opiate addictions. In December, ADAMH approved a new initiative to fund treatment for addiction at the YWCA through the Heritage of Hannah Neil program.

Mike Hauger takes a seat in the Safe Point conference room. He’s a case manager with the PATH program, which provides mental health, addiction and primary care services to the homeless. He’s been working for Southeast since 1994. The crack era was rough, he says, and alcohol is a constant scourge. But he’s never seen anything as devastating as this heroin epidemic.

Hauger says that putting the homeless directly into permanent housing and then helping them solve their problems—the Housing First model—doesn’t always work well for heroin users. “Just because you take a person with a lot of demons off the street doesn’t mean the demons won’t follow them.”

Three women walk in and sit down at the table. Hauger motions in their direction: You didn’t see young girls like this before, he says. A girl in a black sweatshirt dives into a Kroger bag full of food. She turns to Koe-Krompecher. “Do you have any resources for anyone who’s pregnant or whatever?”

He asks if it’s for her. No—she points over her shoulder at her friend Tasha. Koe-Krompecher tells Tasha he can call the Van Buren women’s shelter to let them know she’ll be coming, but she’ll still have to call the Homeless Hotline to access the system. They make the call and she waits for a representative to answer, eventually nodding off in her seat. She’s
still on hold about 20 minutes later when her letter is called. According to the letter-assignment sheet, they’re at V. In barely two hours, 22 people have walked through the doors. Tasha follows a nurse out of the room with the phone still pressed to her ear, waiting, her eyes nearly closed.

**Price of the Streets**

While homelessness is on the rise among families, women and youth, there’s one other undeniable fact about the homeless—they’re disproportionately black. A vast racial disparity was identified by Abt and Associates and the Task Force to Prevent Family Homelessness: 73 percent of families and more than 60 percent of single adults who used the shelters were black, in a county where they make up only 22 percent of the general population. To begin addressing that discrepancy, Columbus joined a multicity project called Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities, which aims to form initiatives that will be shared among the cities, including Atlanta, Dallas and San Francisco, by the end of the year.

In the short term, everyone agrees that stemming the tide of evictions is crucial; Heritage says that nearly everyone who comes through the shelters has been evicted. There were 18,441 evictions filed in 2015 in Franklin County; New York City has approximately seven times the population but only 19 percent more evictions, according to a New York Times article. In his work as a policy analyst for county Commissioner Marilyn Brown, Mike Hochron receives calls from people who say they’re being evicted and will be out on the streets. For a long time, the best answer he could give them was to call him back afterward, because then resources to help would become available.

““In addition to being the saddest and most infuriating part of my job, it also became abundantly clear that there was something lacking in the way that we responded to people in those situations,” Hochron says. There’s growing momentum now for avoiding evictions through funding or interventions.
“Preventing someone’s homelessness does so much good for that human being—to be able to keep them in their home, keep their life stabilized,” says Faith Mission’s Villilo. The cost of prevention is far less than the cost of responding to their homelessness, she continues.

Columbus City Councilmember Jaiza Page, who was on the task force, issued ordinances in December that made $48,000 available for rental assistance to those in need, typically in the form of $400 to $700 one-time payments. Organizations like the Legal Aid Society of Columbus and Community Mediation Services also provide programs aimed at resolving tenant-landlord disputes.

The issue of evictions points to a broader problem: Columbus has an obstinate affordable housing crisis. As of August 2016, there was a waiting list of 3,240 households for public housing, and 17,000 people in Central Ohio were on the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers, says Roberta Garber, the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority’s vice president for planning and development. Currently, 54,000 people are paying 50 percent or more of their monthly income toward rent, Garber says—well beyond the 30-percent guideline. Thousands are stretched so thin they’re just one bad break from potentially becoming homeless themselves.

Page mentions the possibility of implementing inclusionary zoning, a set of codes or statutes that require developers who receive a subsidy or tax abatement to set aside a certain number of units for below-market-rate rentals. She admits she needs to research the idea more to see if it’s workable here, but it finally gets to a core problem: Columbus appears to be in the midst of a housing boom, but very few of the new units are affordable for large swaths of the city’s population.

Columbus needs legally mandated, economically integrated housing, Beittel says. Sometimes he drives around the city, awed by everything that’s being built. Where are these people coming from, he wonders—what are their jobs? They must be amazing; these places are expensive. “We’re pricing people into the street,” he says, “and somehow
or other, we have to deal with that.”