

Submission from McKean County Human Services Director Dan Wertz

Our quality of life depends on a constellation and, complex interaction, of people, communities, elected officials, laws, government agencies, regulations, service providers, businesses, and civic and faith organizations, to name a few. In our tract of the Commonwealth's woods spanning almost 1,000 square miles, we share the belief that we're all better when neighbors look out for and support one another.

In McKean County, like many rural communities, fire halls, church fellowship halls, and school auditoriums and gymnasiums form its DNA and, long before Go Fund Me, have and continue to serve as community gathering places to celebrate life and its potential, to lift up neighbors and families when an unexpected health diagnosis reared an ugly head, and to address just about any need caused by a disaster. Driven by shared concern for one another, the community simply asks, "What do you need and how can we help?" It is truly neighborhood human services and what is the heart of our quality rural life.

What will happen to our quality of life when there are less neighbors standing ready to help or when the larger systems designed to support broad and complex needs lack the responsibility, the authority and/or the will to cooperate? Rather than dive into the depths of darkness and resulting despair which could follow from identifying examples when this has happened in human history, it's better to illustrate what's possible when the constellation is invested in helping its neighbors and cooperates to support them.

In October 2023, 67 community members residing in a long-term hotel faced imminent displacement due to safety issues identified by an inspection and condemnation of the building. To put this challenge into perspective using 2020 Census data, 67 McKean County residents is the equivalent of 2,072 Allegheny County residents, 2,658 Philadelphia County residents, 262 Centre County residents, and 449 Erie County residents. An unprecedented mass care event was about to unfold.

To understand the response to it, we must first understand how a response was even possible. In 1996, the McKean County Collaborative Board formed under authority of the McKean County Commissioners with its goal to improve the lives of all residents in the county. The Collaborative Board's diverse membership was charged with creating opportunities for learning and action on needs and challenges within the County and early efforts focused on promoting safe and stable families, early learning, healthy youth development, dental care for patients with medical assistance, and student attendance.

In 2017, the Collaborative Board additionally identified homelessness and housing as emerging needs across the county and formed a housing coalition to assist with increasing emergency shelter quality and capacity, options for specialized housing, and citizen and community awareness around the need. Shortly after the coalition formed, it became evident that individuals who were homeless or at risk of homelessness were being served in large capacity units across the county and that an emergency response plan was needed in the event any of those units were no longer available.

The emergency response plan, reviewed and revised in the Spring 2022, addressed two situations: (1) a local catastrophic event which would trigger the McKean County Department of Emergency Services to implement its Emergency Operations Plan under the requirements of the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Services Code and (2) a non-catastrophic/disaster event which would be coordinated by the housing coalition. **The latter was based entirely on the will of the community to act in the moment**

to leverage support, resources, and/or funding. In other words, it was based entirely on voluntary cooperation and on no prescribed legal or regulatory authority. In either type of event, what was known to the signatories of the plan was that there were 16 large capacity units. What was unknown, was how many people would be impacted and what resources would be available if either event occurred.

During the morning of October 18, 2023, the Bradford City Administrator reached out to the McKean County Human Services Administrator to share that the City was compelled to implement processes to revoke the license of one of the hotels identified in the emergency response plan due to safety problems found during an inspection. A meeting was coordinated with the City Administrator later that afternoon which included County EMA, the Collaborative Board's housing coalition co-chairs, and the Human Services Administrator to understand the potential timelines for residents to vacate the hotel in the event the owner could not remediate the problems. Preliminary timelines indicated the residents would need to vacate their homes in merely days.

By the evening of October 18th, the Human Services Administrator requested assistance from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and had been connected to the Special Assistant to the Secretary who triggered support from the Department's Division of Emergency Planning and Response. By the following afternoon on the 19th, a PA DHS Mass Care Coordinator convened and facilitated the first of almost daily virtual meetings and included 28 stakeholders.

The coordination meetings aimed at addressing: (1) who was affected and their needs; (2) financial resources to address the needs; and (3) development of operational and contingency plans to address the needs. Discussions and planning ranged from how to stage a mass care shelter in the event the 67 individuals of diverse needs required a place, to how to provide for the 30-plus pets. By the last coordination meeting, there were 70 stakeholders involved representing the local community, the county, and multiple Commonwealth departments. This figure does not include the additional community members and University of Pitt Bradford students who stood ready to volunteer themselves at the staged shelter sites and others who donated money and resources so necessities could be secured for individuals.

On November 8, 2023, three weeks after notice of the potential mass care crisis, the City was able to confirm substantial progress had been made by the hotel owner to address the safety problems and subsequently issued a conditional license to allow the residents to remain in the hotel.

It is almost unimaginable to consider consequences that could have resulted for the 67 hotel residents – grandparents trying to find a way for their grandchildren to visit them, a mother trying to find her way through past trauma, an uncle trying to fix the bad choices of youth – had any one of the folks who answered the call, chose the opposite. Our current system did not require any of the calls made to be made, yet they were made. Those calls were not made because of the current laws and regulations, but because those with some responsibility, some authority, and the will to cooperate did so out of recognition to care for its neighbors.

We addressed the crisis. The causes remain. The number of community responders continues to decline. Yet, we have a huge opportunity. We have an opportunity to reexamine systems lifted by larger populations and to reinvest resources into community-driven action before the crises.