

Advocates fear Trump budget will erode progress in housing

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CROWN POINT, Ind. - Advocates fear that cuts to affordable housing programs included in President Donald Trump's proposed budget will undermine several years of declines in homelessness across Indiana.

Caroline Shook, chief executive officer of Housing Opportunities in Valparaiso, said the president's proposed budget for fiscal year 2018 would eliminate several federal grants relied upon by shelters and homeless assistance programs.

Sharron Liggins, executive director of the Continuum of Care Network of Northwest Indiana, said that if the proposed cuts come to fruition, it will impact the work of those working to end homelessness.

"It will erode the progress we've made," she told The (Northwest Indiana) Times (<http://bit.ly/2uVECnp>).

The Indiana Housing & Community Development Authority recently reported that a statewide survey of the homeless population conducted each year on Jan. 25 found 3,203 homeless people this year in Indiana, not including Marion and St. Joseph counties. That was down 13.6 percent from the 3,711 homeless people counted a year earlier.

Over five years, the homeless population has fallen 17.4 percent.

State and local officials attributed the continued reduction in homelessness to rapid rehousing and housing-first programs, which aim to quickly transition homeless persons into permanent, affordable housing without preconditions. The programs provide social services after the person has been housed.

The most dramatic declines have occurred among homeless veterans and the chronically homeless. A person is chronically homeless if he or she has been homeless for at least a year, or repeatedly homeless for several years, while struggling with a disabling condition, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The statewide population of homeless veterans has fallen 33.4 percent in a five-year period, and the chronically homeless has declined by about 19 percent.

Shook said her Valparaiso agency began four years ago to prioritize the chronically homeless on its waiting list for housing services.

Liggins, of the Continuum of Care Network, said the reduction in both the chronically homeless and homeless veterans population in Lake County can be attributed to two supportive housing complexes: the South Shore Commons, a 60-unit apartment complex that opened in 2014, and the Northwest Indiana Veterans Village, a 44-unit apartment complex that opened last March.

A more troubling trend has been a steady increase statewide in the past several years in the number of homeless domestic violence victims. That population has increased almost 13 percent statewide since 2015, to 735 people.

Brad Meadows, a spokesman for the Indiana Housing & Community Development Authority, said the loss of federal funds for transitional housing has hurt domestic violence providers across the state.

Homeless providers will get some new state assistance under a new law that created a homelessness prevention program based on the housing-first model. The current state budget provides \$2 million for the program.