

**Living** from 7A

Teter also believes that many of the domestic violence cases he sees at SOS are directly linked to the housing and employment issues.

"They don't know what's going to happen from one moment to the next," he said. "And they're lashing out at each other because they're stressed and scared."

But the abused stay in the abusive relationships because they can't find a place to live. So they end up at SOS for help.

In 2016, there were 267 clients receiving domestic violence advocacy services from SOS.

When individuals do lose their homes, and end up living in a car, a whole host of other stresses enters their psyches.

"You've got to sleep with one eye open," Teter said. "You don't know if you're going to get robbed from another homeless person. You're not getting the sleep that you need. And a majority of mental illnesses are caused by lack of sleep. They're more likely to develop schizophrenia and dissociative disorders — all because they're homeless and they aren't getting the sleep they need."

"So, we're seeing this rise in mental illness."

It's not only the working poor that are having difficulties. One of the hardest populations for SOS to assist are those on Social Security Income (SSI).

"It's not just the seniors, but we have a lot of disabled people trying to raise families on that," Teter said. "That is a huge issue for us. You have this older population who can't afford to stay where they're at."

According to Teter, SOS is only now discovering the difficulties facing this population and the limitations for those reliant upon SSI, which is a federal income supplementation program funded by general tax revenues, which are collected to help aged, blind and disabled people who have little or no income.

"Let's say you have a couple that's been living on SSI for 10 years," Teter said. "Each person receives \$733 a month. They're living in the same household, so they have a combined income of \$1,466 a month. But, there's a rule that says a household cannot make more than \$1,050 a month, so their SSI gets cut back and garnished for the 10 years they were overpaid. ..."

"So now this couple, who was trying to live on \$1,466 a month, is trying to live on \$733 a month — and their rent is \$750."

Because getting full-time employment is not possible for these individuals without giving

up their SSI, they are forced to find nontraditional means of securing an income.

"They're selling a lot of items," Teter said. "Begging. Trying to find some way to make under-the-table income doing artwork or whatever else they can do."

Teter said some people will get donated items from SOS and turn around and sell it just to pay the rent.

"We have free clothing here, so they'll come get some and then have a little yard sale to pay the rent or their electric bill," said Teter.

The vast majority of individuals in the Siuslaw region are just one step away from becoming homeless, Teter and Huenergardt believe.

"This isn't sustainable," Teter said.

While SOS is playing a part in helping to alleviate some of the stresses that the region is facing, Teter said the program does not purport to be a hand out, only a hand up.

"Our agency is trying to encourage longevity instead of just, 'Okay, we're going to get you in there for a month and you're off the street,'" Huenergardt said. "That's not what we're here for. We really do

strive to make sure the self-sufficiency is there for success."

While SOS does provide resources to help clients with past due rent or utilities, it looks at how a client views a budget and what changes can be made to help prevent late notices from coming in.

"We're trying to do a wrap-around kind of assistance because the goal is to get them in a situation where they don't need us," Teter said. "We're not putting a bandage on a gushing wound. We want to help heal that wound a little bit."

And SOS has seen progress with its clients.

"The good news is, we've seen a lot less applications for housing assistance," Teter said. "I think a part of that is, people are staying in their homes longer. They've figured out how to make money to sustain themselves — like doing two or three jobs."

Teter is also seeing less people getting laid off in winter months, as some employers are beginning to understand the costs of constantly hiring and rehiring employees.

However, that's still not the norm.

And, despite all the positives Teter sees in the drop of applica-

tions, he has found that in some cases, it is because people are simply leaving town.

The work that SOS does has an impact, Teter said, but he doesn't believe it will fix the overall problem — which will require broader changes within the fundamental economic makeup of the Siuslaw region.

Still, Teter and Huenergardt see hope in how the City of Florence is moving forward on the issue.

"I think we've got a city government right now that's sensitive to the issue," said Teter. "In talking with Mayor Joe Henry and Florence City Manager Erin Reynolds, they understand why we're in this predicament. They understand what needs to happen."

"It's impressive to me, too, that they care enough to give it a second look," Huenergardt said. "Because, honestly, they could just leave it to the business own-

ers and the economy of the city. They've actually taken a very positive role in saying 'Hey, let's see what we can do about this.'"

Some of the city's plans include building more housing and bringing in better jobs with higher wages.

Though the city is working to make this happen, the results are not guaranteed. And if they happen, the process will take time — in part because, as Teter has discovered, some in the community

don't fully understand the depth of the crisis at hand.

Teter said, "I was talking with a person who said, 'Well, we built some new houses in town. There's a whole bunch by the golf courses over there.' That's true, but someone has to be making \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year to afford them," he said. "Most of the people who need housing are working part-time jobs. Do you know anybody working like that who earns that much money?"

See LIVING 9A

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