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Homelessness on the rise in Mass.

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Pete Miller sleeps on the steps of a church in Fitchburg's Upper Common at night and fills his days dreaming of a better life.

The Fitchburg Public Library is his go-to spot day after day, as he wiles away the hours until it's time to go to sleep.

"Where I lay my head, I lay my head," Miller said.

It's not the way the 29-year-old envisioned his life.

"This is just how it worked out," Miller said.

With cooler weather moving in for autumn and winter, he knows he'll have to go indoors soon.

Miller is among the growing number of homeless in Massachusetts.

The number of people who have experienced homelessness has more than doubled since 1990, according to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless' website.



And the number of homeless people in Massachusetts has grown from 16,646 in 2010 to 19,029 in 2013, according to HUD's latest available figures.

"There are a lot of different factors that go into it," said Rhonda Siciliano, a spokeswoman in HUD's Boston office.

The lack of affordable housing is considered a driving force in homelessness for all categories.

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The numbers of homeless families and veterans have been among the fastest rising categories.

Miller stays to himself but there are communities within the city where the homeless gather.

Usually under bridges.

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Kevin MacLean, director of homeless services for Our Father's House ☒ Lunenburg Street, knows where to look for the homeless to hand out blankets or encouraging words.

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MacLean is a former newspaper editor who worked in New Hampshire and Massachusetts but made a career change several years ago.

"I love this," MacLean said. "I'm a problem solver, switching from journalism to social work was a natural."

He's not Pollyanna, and approaches campsites for the homeless with caution because he doesn't always know the reception he'll get.

MacLean went down to a tent village and met a man to whom he promised to bring a blanket but backed off when another man who appeared drunk grew belligerent.

The homeless village is in a narrow arched tunnel filled with tents, mattresses, a makeshift table, a lounge chair, even a television.

Railroad spikes are hammered into the granite wall as pegs for hanging belongings and alongside framed art that hangs on the wall.

Japanese knotweed growing rampantly on the banks of the Nashua River provide cover from prying eyes.

Miller grew up in Shirley with his parents Andre and Sara Miller and an older brother.

He crashed a dirt bike and badly damaged his right hand in 2000.

Miller spent a week in the hospital then another three months recuperating at home.

The hand has never been the same, and his dreams of enlisting in the Army were dashed.

Miller graduated from Lunenburg High School in 2004 and enrolled in Gibbs College on Newbury Street in Boston, studying graphic design.

He admits he started partying too much with his then-girlfriend.

"I flunked out of college," Miller said. "I should've stayed in school."

Miller went home to live with his parents in Shirley before his mother died in 2007.

Then his father died in 2011.

"After my dad, I moved out here and I've been pretty much homeless ever since," he said.

Now he spends his days at The Hope Center Project on River Street or the library.

After sunset he hangs out with a friend until about midnight and then falls asleep about 2 or 3 a.m.

The days blend together, Miller said.

He usually only eats one meal a day and finds it at Our Father's House on Lunenburg Street or Faith Christian Church on Boutelle Street.

When he is walking the streets, he sometimes finds a place to stash his bag of clothes and small possessions.

He has cousins and a brother who sometimes let him do laundry at their homes.

His brother will probably let him crash at his home when the weather gets cold, but Miller knows he can wear out his welcome and sometimes stays at Our Father's House.

Once in a while he goes to a hotel to take a shower and watch the news on television.

Miller hasn't given up hope for a better life even if it's modest.

"I just want to be financially stable, get my own place and off the streets," Miller said.

Miller said he and a friend are planning to split the rent on an apartment finally using his Social Security income.

MacLean is promising to help Miller put down the first and last month's rents, as well as a security deposit if he can find an apartment, using federal Department of Housing and Urban Development grant funding.

Our Father's House has enough room for only 28 people.

As many as four people sleep in a room that MacLean insists occupants keep clean or face risk of expulsion.

The state Department of Housing and Community Development distributes federal HUD funding that pays about half the budget for Our Father's House. Local donations pay the rest.

Temporary residents have to meet federal guidelines for homelessness.

"You have to be living on the street or in the woods," MacLean said.

About 900 people stayed at the house last year, including 600 who visited for the first time.

MacLean and his staff offer food and blankets to the homeless but also guidance on where to get counseling or government help.

"We'll give you the tools to succeed but we're not going to do it for you," MacLean said.

Not everybody wants to come off the streets, MacLean said.

He was working with a 64-year-old Gardner man who refused to stay at Our Father's House and instead slept in the woods under a blue tarp surrounded by health drinks and health food.

He'd been arrested for breaking and entering after a homeowner found him squatting in her basement.

A district court judge agreed to release him on the condition he stay at Our Father's House as an alternative to jail, but when he refused to stay, MacLean was forced to report back to the court to protect his organization's reputation.

HUD is committed to ending homelessness among the veteran population by 2015.

"We've been targeting that population in particular," Siciliano, the HUD spokeswoman, said. "The theory is, that is the easiest homeless issue to solve and can be solved."

It has kicked off its Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness with a seven-point strategy.

The state has found that the housing-first model is the best way to avoid homelessness, Siciliano said. Find them a place to live and they will find work, benefits and health treatments that will help them break the cycle of homelessness, she said.

Massachusetts is one of the few states that track the number of families going to shelters, said Robyn Frost, executive director of Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

"There are very few states that are able to count the number of families that are homeless because they don't have state family shelters," Frost said.

The numbers of homeless families has surpassed capacity at shelters so the state is putting them in motels.

The root cause is the cost of rents, Frost said.

Rents have risen steadily for five years and have priced-out low- and moderate-income families, she said.

"This has been going on several, several years and maybe a little bit before the recession," Frost said.

Jesse Muldoon has been homeless only a few weeks and isn't looking forward to the cooler weather.

"I'm kind of worried, and know it's only going to get worse," Muldoon said. "I'm already starting to get bronchitis. I have to get work."

Muldoon is a divorced father of two young children and is three months behind on payments.

He was making about \$35,000 a year working in a plastics manufacturing company in Leominster, but he lost his job and his unemployment ran out.

His roommates moved out, leaving Muldoon with the \$1,000 a month rent, so he lost his home in Leominster.

Muldoon sleeps with friends or at the train station.

He fell asleep in front of a doorway and woke up when somebody opened the door one morning last week.

Muldoon doesn't get Social Security funding but does qualify for food stamps.

He says he attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and is trying to stay sober.

His biggest goal late this week was to get minutes put back on his cellphone so prospective employers could contact him.