ministry spotlight

ending area child homelessness

Written by Mindy Rathbone

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Matthew 25: 37-40

Homelessness in our society has a variety of definitions. Someone is considered homeless if they are living outside, in a place unsuitable for human habitation, or in a car. One is also homeless if living with family or friends, and in most of these cases there are many more people in a house or apartment than there are beds in which to sleep. Staying in a motel paid for by an agency or ministry group is also considered to be a state of homelessness.

Without a doubt Haywood County has a problem with homelessness. In 2017, the poverty rate for Haywood County was 15.9%, indicating one in 6.5 people was living in poverty and making the rate in Haywood County 3.6% higher than the National average. During that same time frame, Waynesville was experiencing a 23% poverty rate. To make matters even worse, the Haywood County School System reported the number of homeless children in 2017 to be approximately 300; however, that number did not include children who were not yet enrolled in the school system. Therefore, a more accurate estimate of homeless children in Haywood County would have been 400.

These numbers are alarmingly unacceptable. For much too long it was considered the government's responsibility to address the needs of the homeless. However, Scripture clearly states it is the duty of the Church to take care of those in need. Jesus was quite explicit in telling us that it is OUR job as followers of Christ to feed, clothe, and shelter those in need.

The EACH Initiative (Ending Area Child Homelessness) is an effort to connect homeless families with caring congregations in order to reduce the number of homeless children in Haywood County. The goal of the EACH Initiative is to partner with churches in order to break this cycle by providing transitional housing and relational support to families as they move to a position of self-sustainability and acquire long-term housing.

Our first step towards this goal was taken in July 2017 when the Long's Chapel family became the first to join forces with The EACH Initiative and declare our commitment to help the homeless children in our midst. Since that time, we have been working tirelessly to break the cycle of homelessness in Haywood County one family at a time. We have served
four families to date. One of those families has exited the program into long-term, sustainable housing. Another family is going through the process of applying for their own Habitat house. Two families remain currently in the program and are learning to make those choices that lead to self-sustainability. Lives are being changed.

The EACH Initiative is more than just housing. The program involves intensive case management that is offered through EACH and coordination with all professional services that might be needed. This program would be incomplete without the role of the local church congregation. It is the congregation that provides a house for a homeless child/children and her/his family by allowing them to trade in their survival skills for skills of stability and safety. This includes providing a physical safety net of housing, furnishings, utilities, and financial assistance for the entire family. Additionally, one of the most important roles of the congregation is to partner with the families by offering mentoring in areas such as budgeting, preparing healthy meals, and developing good parenting skills. The church truly takes on the role of a servant, thus fulfilling God's command "... to look after orphans and widows in their distress..." James 1:27

When families move from being homeless to being housed, lives are significantly changed. Grades and behavior improve, self-esteem rises, nutrition/food choices become healthier, and illness/school absences decrease.

There is still more good news to report! Long's Chapel is in the process of building a house that will help more families have a home. Using mainly volunteer labor, the new modular home should be completed in less than six months. Because the EACH program is structured to be up to a 24-month program, the number of families this one house will serve is limitless. Once the family becomes self-sustaining, we will assist them in finding their own permanent housing and continue the case management for a number of months to insure continued stability.

The EACH Initiative, through the help of volunteers, is also building two additional modular homes as a fundraising project. These houses are targeted to be sold to the workforce of Haywood County such as teachers and policemen who otherwise would be unable to afford the purchase of a home. In addition, these new homes will add affordable housing into the critically low housing inventory of Haywood County. Could it be that some day one of our EACH families will be able to purchase one of these houses as their very own? Would not that be an incredible milestone in ending area child homelessness? What a marvelous way to respond to God's call on His church! Thank you Long's Chapel. You are at the forefront of making a difference.

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