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## My Turn: Help needed for homeless folks to find shelter on a cold winter night



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In November, on a Sunday, I had a text from a staff member at Montague Catholic Social Ministries. She was trying to help a woman who had been unable to get into the Wells Street Shelter run by ServiceNet in Greenfield. Thanks to the Salvation Army and a local evangelical church and its pastor, this woman had been housed at a local motel for seven nights; she did not know where she could go that Sunday night. As a member of the Interfaith Council Housing Assistance Committee, I knew we had funds to house her for two nights at the motel, and then two more nights, until ServiceNet could get a bed for her on Thursday at their Northampton shelter. The pastor's wife drove the woman to the shelter.



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Most recently, several of us had a late afternoon email exchange generated by a staff member at the Living Room, a Clinical and Support Options (CSO) site, and forwarded by a Community Action Pioneer Valley (CAPV) staff member, appealing to a small local foundation and our committee for assistance. A car had broken down, leaving a young couple (the mom pregnant) and their puppy looking for a place to stay that night; there was no room at ServiceNet's Shelter, and the Living Room would have given them a tent, but they had recently handed out their last one. Could either of our groups pay for a night at a motel? This time, someone connected with the local foundation responded with funds for a night at the motel.

Invaluable work is done in our community by the large agencies listed above. But both exchanges left me with these concerning questions:

- How can it be that ServiceNet, CSO, and Community Action ... three of the most highly funded nonprofits in our county, whose various missions are to support people who are poor, homeless, and/or have multiple challenges ... all knew that this couple had nowhere to stay that December night, and not one of them could help, because ServiceNet's capacity was inadequate and CSO and CAPV are not prepared for this kind of

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- What is the plan for after-hour shelter assistance in our community? Why is there no local 24/7 call number?

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- Year after year, how can the lack of enough shelter beds be featured as a crisis in Recorder headlines in November? When the shelter was full all summer? And how can that urgent need fall on the shoulders of Greenfield's Community and Economic Development Director MJ Adams and the city to fix, when we have organizations whose mission it is to provide shelter?

And finally, and perhaps most importantly:

- Who feels actual ownership of the critical need to respond to an individual or family who needs shelter tonight in our community?

I am so pleased to read of the hard work being done to create long-term housing all over our county: Senior housing in Sunderland, on-going affordable housing discussions in Greenfield, Montague and Erving.

But I raise these concerns with great hope that quick action will be taken to find additional shelter beds for tonight. If we cannot solve this problem now, when federal and state governments are targeting housing and homelessness with record funding, and when we have an enormous Armory and the Farren Care Center both sitting empty, then I fear we never will.

Amy Clarke lives in Greenfield.



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