

## Sentinel & Enterprise (Fitchburg, MA)

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### Fitchburg police chief: Region needs more homeless shelters

*Evan Lehmann*

FITCHBURG -- A tarp fastened to steel green girders prevents dirt from falling onto Pam McDowell's bed, which is located under a downtown bridge. "I've been here two years -- winter, spring, fall," said McDowell, sitting barefoot on a patch of ground covered by old carpeting as she passes an oversized bottle of vodka to a friend late Monday morning. "There's too many people out here."

McDowell, 44, shares her camp, one of many hidden in the woods, along the river and or in abandoned



buildings of Fitchburg, with Erik Kamppuri, 38. He sleeps in a separate bed, which, like his host's, is made of eggshell foam sitting on wooden pallets.

He has a small stack of books; she can't read but speaks of meticulously organizing her vanity, topped with a mirror reflecting a collection of anti-perspirants, lotions and aspirin. "I lost my job, then I lost my place," said Kamppuri, who's spent the last year in and out of a downtown shelter until arriving under the bridge in April. "There's camps all over Fitchburg."

Fitchburg Police Chief Edward Cronin says the region needs another

homeless shelter -- although not necessarily in Fitchburg -- to deal with what he describes as the city's growing homeless population.

"I have eyes in my head. I see it," said Cronin. "I think the community as a whole needs to look a lot harder at the issue, rather than what I think is a blanket approach."

A population often plagued by drug addiction and blamed for a gritty city image, the homeless need additional regional services, Cronin said, not strong-arm enforcement.

"I'm always leery of using the police as an answer, and I feel that pressure," Cronin said. "I think there definitely needs to be more comprehensive services for people who live in this city."

Mayor Dan H. Mylott eschews any notion of providing another shelter in the city, saying neighboring cities such as Leominster and Gardner need to contribute more to alleviating what he says is a regional problem.

"We are not going to stop homelessness. We are not going to eradicate people living in the woods. It's part of being a city," Mylott said recently in an interview. "We do our share. I'm just fed up with people thinking this has to be the place. We do our share, and we're going to continue to do it."

The city has two emergency shelters: **Our Father's House** on Lunenburg Street, with 28 beds, and the Valiton House on Fairmount Street, which is operated by state Rep. Emile Goguen.

The Montachusett Interfaith Hospitality Network, a collection of 10 churches in Fitchburg, Leominster and Lunenburg, also shelters up to 14 homeless family members, but must turn people away.

**Our Father's House**, in addition, runs two transitional housing programs, one for men and one for women, which provide tenants an opportunity to build a two-year track record of paying rent, saving money, and staying off drugs and alcohol.

"We've been full right along," said Barbara Garneau, executive director of **Our Father's House**. "The last few years have been very stressful in terms of being full all the time."

Garneau says the region's lack of affordable apartments, such as those found in rooming houses, is the main contributor to homelessness.

"But we haven't seen any developers do that because there really isn't any profit in it," Garneau said. City Councilor at-large Ralph R. Romano III said the homeless problem in Fitchburg is exacerbated by social service agencies, which, apart from counseling, provide methadone treatment, food, needle-cleaning products and other services.

"Every community around has the same problems," Romano said. "The difference is Fitchburg provides some of the solutions, so it attracts those people from surrounding communities."

But Gardner Mayor Gerald E. St. Hilaire said the Gardner Community Action Center gives free food to impoverished residents every week day.

"I personally don't know of anyone in Gardner who became homeless and moved to Fitchburg," St. Hilaire said.

Indeed, St. Hilaire said, "I'm really not aware of any real homeless problem" in Gardner.

Under the Fitchburg bridge, McDowell and Kamppuri are an example of the homeless population in Fitchburg. Both grew up in the city above their heads, they said, taking turns lifting the vodka bottle to their lips.

McDowell said the police generally leave her alone, because she doesn't permit drug use under the bridge and keeps the area clean of debris.

Both acknowledged having mental illnesses, and said they associate with approximately 40 homeless people in seven different camps in Fitchburg.

Kamppuri, who at one point took a lens-cleaning cloth from his pocket and wiped down his glasses, was hesitant to guess how many homeless residents live in Fitchburg, but said he was aware of more than 100.

"It's getting worse and worse," said McDowell, who claims to have lived on the street for the last 14 years.