

What Would Oxford Look Like ...

If There Were No Poverty?

This was the question the Eradicating Systemic Poverty (ESP) Team asked a group of Oxford citizens, including members of OCP, government officials, and social service agency employees and clients in November of 2021. Many issues were identified, but affordable housing for all was the top priority.

Thus, the ESP Team organized a community meeting on May 1, 2022, during which information on the topics of homelessness (the unhoused), transitional housing, and affordable housing was presented by speakers directly involved in these issues. What did we learn?

First, for many of us, it was the juxtaposition of leaving our suburban or small-town homes with spring flowers, flowering trees, and green lawns to be inside and discuss the prospect of living in a car or a tent. It was also a time to consider how a country of relative wealth could justify a homeless encampment next to an elementary school (in our community) and how do we explain this to our children and grandchildren.

One of the university interns at the Family Resource Center (FRC) put together some facts for us to ponder. They follow:

- According to the US Census Bureau, there were over 37 million people living in poverty in 2020 in the US.
- On any given night, 590,000 people are experiencing homelessness in the US. Since the homeless are difficult to find, this is an undercount.
- 70% of all extremely low-income families pay more than half their incomes on rent.
- There is no state or county where a renter working full-time at a minimum wage job can afford a two-bedroom apartment.
- Around 75% of the rental units in Oxford go to Miami students, which means only 313 units are left for Oxford's permanent residents. Of these, only 130 of them were affordable for very low-income households.

What did we learn about homelessness?

First, there is homelessness (or a population of the unhoused) in Oxford, just as there is throughout the US. Because it is difficult to see, its numbers are difficult to count. And, the numbers may fluctuate, since the unhoused may rotate where they live from a car in a relative's driveway, to a sofa at a friend's apartment, or a sleeping bag at Hueston Woods Park.

Two of our speakers, Ann Fuehrer, and Karen Frances, from Oxford Citizens for Peace and Justice, provided a plan they have been working on that would bring some answers to the issue of homelessness in our community. An important piece of this plan is to recognize that shelter is a basic human right. Without it, people cannot live lives that are stable and connected, lives that have dignity. We can begin addressing this issue by creating a collaborative community-based response that (1) addresses the urgent needs of unhoused persons by connecting them to existing resources to meet basic needs; (2) eliminate housing insecurity with a network of agencies to enable long-term affordable

housing; (3) employ someone on an ongoing basis to coordinate these efforts. Such a program would provide essential services AND would include community “friends and partners” of concerned citizens who would commit to working together to eliminate homelessness.

What did we learn about transitional housing?

First, transitional housing can mean many things. Typically, however, it would mean a place a person or family goes from a shelter situation before they can afford a more permanent living place. The Oxford Cottage Community, to be located at 5234 Hester Road, is an example of a neighborhood of houses that could fulfill the role of transitional housing or, for a single person or small household, become a permanent home. The Cottage Community will provide innovative affordable housing with community support. Oxford was selected for this pilot project that will meet the needs of small families and seniors and serve as transitional housing or permanent rental housing. This is a planned unit development consisting of 12 cottages of 396 square feet each that can accommodate two to three people each. The cottages will meet HUD standards and the rent will be at or below fair market rate. The project partners include Community Development Professionals (CDP), The City of Oxford, Oxford Community Foundation, First Financial Bank, Cincinnati Development Fund, Butler County, and the Oxford Family Resource Center.

From the City of Oxford, we learned that in 2020 and 2022, the City donated \$177,000 of CARES funds to the Family Resource Center (FRC) to assist with housing needs. The city also purchased 2 acres of land for the affordable cottage community, mentioned previously. In late 2021, the city established a Short-Term Rental lodging tax to be collected from Airbnb and VRBO type rentals and set it up so that the tax collected will go into the housing trust fund. This will ultimately be used for housing assistance. In the meantime, additional funds from the American Rescue Plan will go to FRC for housing assistance. The city has adopted Housing for All as a top priority. Throughout the remainder of 2022, the city will conduct research on the best ways to achieve affordable housing for the long term, utilizing American Rescue Plan funding. It is possible that there will be funds from Butler County for affordable housing programs as well, although this is unknown at the present time. Meanwhile, if city funding is going to go for long term projects, it is critical that citizens continue to support the FRC for its emergency needs.

The ESP Team will keep you informed of government, community, and social programs that support affordable housing for all and the important role of the members of the faith community in these efforts.