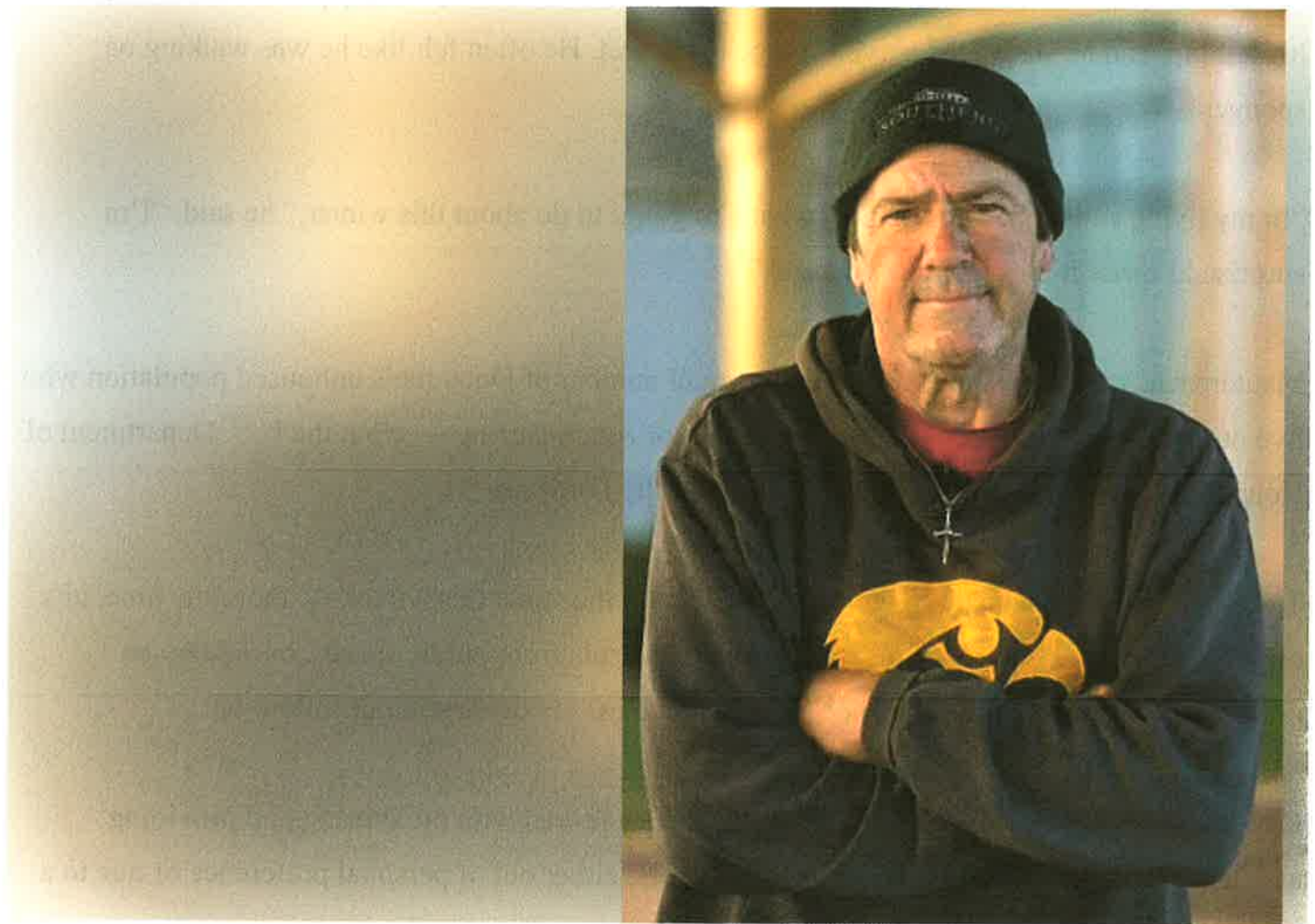


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## Dubuque's homeless face new challenges this winter

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Dave Manternach, of Dubuque, who has struggled with housing stability, is unsure what this winter holds for his I

Photo by: Stephen Gassman

Last weekend left Dave Manternach unsure how he would survive the winter.

In the week leading up to it, the temperature dropped below freezing, and snow dusted the tree grove near the park in Dubuque where he had set up camp. That Friday and Saturday, an icy gale blew dead leaves in through his tent flap, which had broken earlier in the week.

Manternach had done winter outdoors last year, but it hadn't gone well. Two of the toes on his right foot had turned black with gangrene and almost had to be amputated.

He still suffered from chronic pain from injuries sustained as an offensive lineman at Coe College in the 1980s and had trouble walking. He had bursitis, arthritis, a partially pinched sciatic nerve in his left hip, and he suspected nerve damage in his feet. He often felt like he was walking on sponges.

“In my living situation, I don't know what I'm going to do about this winter,” he said. “I'm surprised I made it through this weekend.”

Manternach, a Dubuque native, is one of a small number of Dubuque's unhoused population who live outdoors, as opposed to staying in a shelter or couch-surfing — what the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development calls the “literally homeless.”

There are expected to be more literally homeless on the street this winter. At the same time, city officials have increased removals of unhoused residents from public spaces, backed by an ordinance some have criticized as displacing homeless residents without follow-up.

Community Solutions of Eastern Iowa is the agency tasked with monitoring and providing assistance to homeless residents who live outdoors, either out of personal preference or due to a poor relationship with shelter providers.

Establishing contact is the most important part of the job, said Shelby Eipperle, a CSEI community services advocate, since the literally homeless are often the hardest to track.

“Our No. 1 concern is reaching folks who are most at risk,” Eipperle said.

This summer, CSEI counted 26 unsheltered people in Dubuque County. While the number of people living outdoors typically goes down during the winter, this winter is expected to see more unhoused people than usual, according to Eipperle.

“Twenty-six is the largest number we’ve ever seen, and I suspect we’ll see that same sort of growth when we do our wintertime count,” Eipperle said.

During the winter, many unhoused residents find a friend or good Samaritan to board them, Eipperle said, or migrate to a shelter such as Dubuque Rescue Mission, which recently increased its available space from 18 beds to as many as 35. Rescue Mission Executive Director Rick Mihm said the number of residents there normally doubles during winter.

But then there’s people like Dan McCuddin, a former nurse and Iowa Air National Guardsman who drifted across the country for more than a decade before coming to Dubuque a little more than a year ago. He spent last winter outdoors like Manternach, but he did it in just a sleeping bag. In the National Guard, McCuddin completed survival training specifically to stay alive in subzero temperatures.

“This is a nice little town,” McCuddin said. “They haven’t got that bad of a homeless problem.”

Still, Dubuque City Council members passed an ordinance change in September that gave police stronger enforcement options to remove people camping in public spaces. The ordinance update states that it is unlawful for people to camp on public streets, sidewalks, parks, buildings or land other than in areas designated for camping.

After posting notices of violation at 15 homeless camps in the first eight months of the year, Dubuque police recorded eight more since the ordinance was passed. In 2021, the police posted five notices of violation for camps.

Dubuque Housing and Community Development Director Alexis Steger said police simply are responding to an increase in complaints by residents.

Police Capt. Steve Radloff, of the community-oriented policing division, emphasized that city officials work to make contact with unhoused people when posting a violation or cleaning up a camp and try to avoid throwing away essential items such as sleeping bags.

“If we can see they need more time, we’ll work with them and give them time to figure out where they’re going to go and what they’re going to do,” Radloff said.

However, Amanda Reynolds, executive director of Dubuque’s Urban Bicycle Food Mission and an assistant professor of social work at Loras College, said enforcement of the ordinance has pushed unhoused residents farther from downtown, where homeless service providers such as the Rescue Mission, Salvation Army and churches that provide free meals throughout the week are located.

“It’s less likely they’re going to be accessing other services,” Reynolds said. “You’re adding a hardship by their having to travel.”

It also has hit harder for volunteers at the food mission, who go out on bikes and in cars to deliver meals to homeless residents, to find their clients.

Reynolds especially is critical of the city increasing removals without finalizing or funding a “second responder model” recommended by city staff, in which a dedicated city employee would work with first responders to connect residents in crisis with resources.

“They have a harder time getting to the resources they need, and if they’re displaced without a social worker or secondary responder, we don’t know where they’re at,” Reynolds said.

Steger said housing department officials plan to introduce a proposal for the position to City Council in December, though she could not say whether the position would be funded this fiscal year.

Eipperle said she didn't know how city enforcement would affect CSEI's ability to reach unhoused residents but said CSEI had a "great history" working with law enforcement and the community-oriented policing unit.

Manternach was one of the people who was subject to removal this year. Up until the summer, he had camped in an enclave created by the footpath that crosses over the Locust Street Connection into Flat Iron Park, just blocks from the Rescue Mission.

But this summer, he said two police officers approached him and told him he would have to move after he ignored multiple notice of violation postings. Manternach said he had a good relationship with the officers — he said they even had brought him a plate of cookies and a greeting card with \$20 inside last Christmas — but this order came from their captain. He is now a mile and a half away.

Currently, Manternach says he is working on getting a bed at the rescue mission, though he had lived there and left years before after staff found alcohol in his room in violation of policy.

Four beds were open upstairs as of Tuesday, according to Mihm.

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