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Many homeless face addiction problems

By SHANTAL PARRIS RILEY
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Third of a series

After being kicked out of his apartment in November, Nicholas Scott found himself on the street, in need of a job, transportation and a place to live.

"It's a shock to me," says the 33-year-old. "I'm used to having my own place." On a brisk December evening in the city of Newburgh, he wears a huge, fur-lined parka. His blood shot eyes and slow speech convey exhaustion. He doesn't make eye contact.

"I'm a recovering alcohol and drug addict," he says. "I've been clean for 18 months. Right now, I'm living in transitional housing."

But, he explains, when he received housing assistance from Catholic Charities Community Services of Orange County, he was placed in an apartment above a nearby bar.

(Staff from the Orange County Youth Advocate Program, which oversees client housing in the building, confirmed this week that recovering residents were not permitted inside the bar.)

"They play the music real loud at night," he says. "Every time I walk through the door I have to pass the bar. I'm worried about relapsing."

The nature of the disease

Scott has struggled with drug and alcohol addiction since he was 16. His addiction has led to separation from family and loved ones, including his pregnant girlfriend.

"My main goal right now is to get stable and get a roof over my head so my girlfriend can move in with the baby," he said.

Addiction and chemical dependency is a chronic disease, said Biju Salgunan, director of substance abuse services for the Middletown Addiction Crisis Center. "Addiction is a relapsing and remitting disease like hypertension, diabetes or cancer," Salgunan said. "If it's not managed and continuously supervised it comes back. It's the nature of the disease."

When relapse does occur it often affects every area of a person's life, Salgunan said.

"Say a person who is in recovery for six or eight months is back on their feet, doing well and then they relapse - they may lose their job, their housing, they may have relationship difficulties, or



Addiction counselor Amir Gombiner works the phone at the Middletown Addiction Crisis Center.

legal difficulties," he said. "All of these issues come together at once and the situation tends to spiral downward." Relationships will often get pushed to their limits, he added. "Many addicts are shunned by friends, kicked out by family - due to their behavior - and they're sent to the street," he said.

This type of social isolation leads to more issues, he said. "The disease gets worse if we don't accept these people - not the behavior - but the individual with illness," he said. "It helps families to go to support groups. Once you understand what's happening, it's the first step on the road to healing."

Earlier this month, Salgunan and a handful of addiction counselors met in the "observation room" at the crisis center. The room was surrounded with glass windows that looked out onto a 15-bed dormitory.

"We provide detox for patients who use substances - alcohol, cocaine, heroin, and other drugs - in a medically-monitored environment," he said.

Nurses and counselors are on-hand to monitor patients on a 24/7 basis. "We're a little like Grand Central Station," he said. "Patients of all types come here. We assess their need and get them on their way."

Patients needing a higher level of detoxification are stabilized and sent to hospitals; others are transferred to half-way houses or to in-patient treatment centers. About 75 percent of patients are men and more than 60 percent are homeless.

Salgunan said occupancy had gone up at the treatment center since he began working there four years ago. I think it's partially due to cutbacks in our social services system," he said. "This is not

only in the county, but across the state. People really need help."

Affordable housing is a huge part of the equation, he said.

"If these patients had access to low-cost, affordable housing, coupled with some form of treatment, whether it be outpatient services or at clinics, their level of relapse would be less."

Local shelters do provide relief for people struggling with addiction, however temporary, he said. "About 50 percent of our guests are currently addicted to drugs or alcohol," said Leslie Hoffman of the Newburgh Ministry emergency shelter on Johnston Street in Newburgh.

In order to ensure safety, the shelter does not allow guests who are high or drunk to stay at the facility. Hoffman said visual inspections and conversation were usually enough to identify an intoxicated person. The more familiar shelter workers are with guests, the easier it is to tell when they're intoxicated, she said.

The mental health connection

Harder to recognize are the mental health issues inherent to the disease of addiction.

"A lot of addicts have comorbid issues," said Salgunan. "They are dually-diagnosed with substance abuse and mental health issues. Approximately 50 percent of mental health patients have substance abuse issues and vice versa."

Sometimes it's hard to say which came first, he said.

Like addiction, mental illness tends to be cyclical in nature, said Domenick Fata, executive director Renwick Recovery, Inc., a state-licensed supportive living facility in the city of Newburgh. Approximately 80 percent of the recovering residents at the facility also struggle with mental illness, Fata said. Finding housing can be an enormous challenge for these people, he said.

"When they're cycling in and out of mental health, they may stop taking meds," he said. "They'll sometimes compensate when they can't get the medications by self-medicating and then relapse. And then the downward spiral occurs - they end up in the hospital, or in jail, and it ends up costing the taxpayers money."

The mentally ill often have a hard time navigating the social services system, said Fata.

"A lot of social workers don't understand that this is a sick person they're dealing with," he said. "They make them

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Town, PBA reach 5-year pact

Continued from page 1

Bello said Friday, adding that it was unheard of for a town to hire part-time police officers.

An hourly rate for the part-time officers has yet to be determined, but the jobs will be devoid of health benefits and vacation time. Officers will be limited to 1,040 hours per year (20 hours per week) and must be certified with prior police experience. The town will not be responsible

for police academy training.

The town will have the added quartermaster expenses of providing uniforms and weapons for the new officers.

Currently, the Town of Newburgh Police Department comprises 44 full-time officers plus the chief of police, an assistant chief and two lieutenants. The department is down eight officers, the result of retirements and disability.

The town's police force has gradually decreased since 2009 when two recently hired officers were laid off. One of the two was eventually rehired. The second officer was offered his job back but had moved on, becoming a police officer in the city of Peekskill.

"We're clearly doing more with less," said Bello.

Several attempts to reach PBA president Fred Dinardo for comment on the agreement were unsuccessful.

Judge limits Roseton assessment cuts

Continued from page 1

three years."

Town of Newburgh Supervisor Wayne Booth said that while taxing entities must negotiate a settlement with the purchaser, the assessment cannot be less than \$447.5 million (50 percent of the current \$895 million assessment).

Booth said that negotiations will begin right after the first of the year.

"I have a meeting with the new owners of Roseton on Jan. 7," Booth said Friday.

Asked if LDH could still walk away from the deal, Booth responded in the affirmative. But he expected the new owners to bargain in good faith.

Another part of the judge's ruling forbids the seller (1) from entering "into any agreements with, or engage in any discussions or negotiations with such tax authorities regarding the matters contemplated by this Section without the prior written consent of the buyer (not to be unreasonably withheld, conditioned or delayed) and (2) shall provide the buyer, at least 24 hours in advance, notice of and an opportunity to participate in, all in-person, telephonic or other meetings with such tax authorities regarding any other matters, and shall copy the buyer on all correspondence with such tax authorities."

No one (at least locally) is happy about the sale.

Marlboro School Superintendent Ray Castellani expressed shock when he first

learned of the sale price for Roseton (\$19.5 million). He said the school district has already cut expenses by \$5 million while anticipating a reduction in assessment. The next step will be further cuts, the renegotiation of contracts and an appeal to the Legislature for help, or at a minimum, a plan to improve the flow of state aid.

The district continues to investigate the possibility of the sale or lease of two of the district's three elementary schools although it isn't something it wishes to do.

John Kaiser, president and business manager of Local 320 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, called the closing of the Danskammer plant "unfortunate," disputing the bankruptcy judge's characterization of Danskammer as a coal-fired plant.

"It's a multi-fuel plant," Kaiser said emphatically. "It was refurbished in 1982 and again in 1986."

Kaiser also took issue with Dynegey's assertion that Hurricane Sandy left the Danskammer plant uninhabitable.

"That plant had a lot of life left in it," he said.

"It's kind of curious why they did that," he said, lamenting the fact that the decision to sell Danskammer for scrap has left 60 workers unemployed.

"Local 320 will continue to work with those workers to try to find them jobs," Kaiser said.

"From the beginning, Dynegey has been

a bad actor," he said. "The Hudson Valley embraced Dynegey when they purchased Roseton and Danskammer and they've left us with a wake of financial havoc."

Kaiser said he planned to meet with the new owners of Roseton early in the new year to determine what role workers of Local 320 can play in the new operation.

Hudson Valley Area Labor Federation President Paul Ellis-Graham said that "the people in this community hoped that a responsible buyer could be found for the Roseton and Danskammer generating stations. Based on news reports, we have a buyer but it is not clear that they are a responsible one.

"I am dismayed to learn that the Hudson Valley is losing the Danskammer plant and the electricity, tax revenue and

good middle-class jobs that it provided. In addition, it seems that the new buyer, Louis Dreyfus Highbridge Energy will continue with Dynegey's policy of relentlessly demanding concessions from its workers.

"Dynegey has proven to be a reckless out-of-state speculator and has left a path of economic destruction in its wake. I sincerely hope that Louis Dreyfus Highbridge Energy will prove to be the responsible community member that Dynegey was not and bargain fairly and honor its tax obligations to this community. The livelihood of our neighbors and the education of our children in our community should not be sacrificed to corporate greed."

Homeless face addiction problems

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jump through so many hoops. As social workers and addictions counselors, we're supposed to meet these clients where they are. A lot of these people are being talked down to and they're not being treated like human beings when they walk in."

Clients arrive to the facility through referrals by hospitals, inpatient programs and other health agencies. On average, clients stay at the facility anywhere from six to nine months, Fata said.

But, the county Department of Social Services recently halted referrals to Renwick when, according to Fata, one client was allowed to stay for too long. "We kept him for three years," said Fata. "He was in the nursing program at Orange County Community College and I wanted to make sure he finished his finals."

Fata was unapologetic about the incident. "We discharge people when we think it's appropriate," he said. "We base the length of stay on the individual client and their individual needs."

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