

Homeless in Lansdale plead for public to ‘help the situation’

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A man checks his phone while sitting on a cot inside the gazebo at Memorial Park in Lansdale on Tuesday, July 23 2024. (Dan Sokil – MediaNews Group)



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LANSDALE — As borough council fields another round of talks on homelessness, and what to do about those living in borough parks, there are other voices not heard from.

And those who live in the park have plenty to say.

The Reporter visited Memorial Park this week, to try to learn more about who is there, for how long, and hear their thoughts and stories.

Of the four men living in the gazebo, one asked if the others had cigarettes, then left the park to look for those, and said his advice to the public would be “help out where you can.”

A second asked about the weather, and when the next round of summer showers would arrive, then went to wash his belongings in the park’s water bottle filling fountains.

A third said his biggest issue has been securing a Social Security number and birth certificate: “If you don’t have that, you can’t get a job. You don’t have a phone? Can’t call your employer, you can’t look up transportation, nothing,” he said, before settling down to sleep under a sheet atop a sleeping bag.

The fourth had plenty to say, including suggestions for borough council, and other advocates across the county, to consider.

“You’ve got a whole lot of houses that are abandoned around here. There’s one right down here, that’s boarded up,” on Jenkins Avenue, he said. “If they don’t want us here, why don’t they take one of the properties, that they own, make it safe?”

“You could hire a person — appoint one or two people to walk through every couple of hours. Because the truth is, we all kind of look out for each other. They don’t want to spend money, but they’re gonna spend money chasing us somewhere, all they’re gonna do is, (upset) another community.”

Getting by with a little help

The men who live in the gazebo share snacks, water, food handed out by neighbors, and advice, and watch over each other’s belongings — sleeping bags, a cot, a chair, a cooler, a shopping cart, a backpack, bags of donated food and water bottles. One said he had worked in sales locally, has family in New York and left a rehab facility there in December.

“It’s actually easier to be homeless in Brooklyn than in Lansdale. Why? Because people in New York will feed you, they’ll give you money. I lived on Coney Island, and having food and money was not an object. All I had to do was walk down the boardwalk and ask someone, ‘When you’re done with your food, could you give me some?’ Here, they’ll give you a citation for panhandling.



A plaque honors late 'Mayor Mike' DiNunzio outside the gazebo at Memorial Park in Lansdale on Tuesday, July 23 2024. (Dan Sokil – MediaNews Group)

“If you want people not sleeping outside and offending people, take a couple of these abandoned buildings, fix them up to code, get some running water, how much does it cost? I’m not saying put beds in there, give us sleeping bags, give us pillows. We’re sleeping on concrete here, sleeping on a floor inside is not going to be anything near this.”

He recently stayed in a hotel temporarily to get out of the heat. He has lost his medical insurance due to a recent stroke, and his only source of income is Social Security disability. He said he can’t afford a regular supply of the medications needed to treat an existing heart condition.

“I do what I have to do: I will get chest pains, somebody will come and pick me up in an ambulance, I will explain in an ER how bad my chest pains are, and they will get me a 30-day supply out of their pharmacy. Because I have no money, and this is a game I have to play.”

‘Some kind people’

He and the others have encountered borough police and their mental health co-responder, but with little tangible help to show so far, they said. They take occasional walks to nonprofit food pantry Manna on Main Street a few blocks east, but he said more help has come from neighbors and area residents like Linda Rowland, who helped establish a GoFundMe online fundraiser and a nonprofit to provide the sleeping bags, food, and beverages.

“They give us water, they come out with clothes, they bring people, there’s another who will bring dinner. So there are some kind people,” he said.

“We do understand this looks like (expletive) — what we’re saying is, look, give us a place so that we don’t look like (expletive), and get us off the streets.”

As he spoke, contractors worked on the other side of the park, excavating and moving utilities as part of a roughly \$3 million streetscape project meant to extend decorative sidewalks and add drainage improvements along that stretch of Main Street. While the noise bothers the men during daytime hours, they’ve had few problems with wildlife, neighbors, or anyone else seeking trouble.

“They’re probably thinking, why do I want to mess with these crazy dudes? They’re crazy enough to sleep outside. And why would you want to fight with us? You ain’t gonna get nothing. Why would you rob homeless people?”

Before December, the man who is in his early 60s hadn’t talked to any family member in roughly three years, but after a death in the family, he reached out to a sibling: “I don’t even remember what started our argument, it’s been that long.”

“I’ve been in rehabs or homeless for the last three years. I didn’t start out like this. I was married for 17 years, I had a house, I had five children,” two of them North Penn football players.

“I don’t look for work, because I get Social Security disability (income), but it’s just not enough.”



Toiletries and personal belongings can be seen next to sleeping bags in the gazebo at Memorial Park in Lansdale on Tuesday, July 23, 2024. (Dan Sokil – MediaNews Group)

What they need

What do the men at the gazebo need most? It depends, he said: Some may have issues with documentation or identity theft, while others may have more serious mental health issues that need more help. He’s aware of encampments in other borough parks, and said he knows of at least one family living in a car.

“This is my solution,” he said, at least until a family member was scheduled to visit later that afternoon, who could provide a shelter, shower, a place to wash clothes, and a meal, at least short term.

“There’s people here that have some mental issues, there’s people here that have drug and alcohol issues. There’s people here that are just outta luck. When I came here, I should’ve just swallowed my pride, and called my family members right away. I called my son, and said ‘Hey, do you want to meet for a beer?’ And he said, ‘I’m busy.’”

“I was happy when North Penn (renovated) the football stadium, because they always complained about the field, but that doesn’t help us — unless they let us sleep on it.”

Not by choice

What would he say to those who walk by, or steer clear of the gazebo as they do?

“The main thing is, get the word out. We’re here not because we want to be, we’re here because we’ve got shelter, we’ve got each other, it’s circumstance. Some people are waiting for money, some people are just... not waiting for anything, they’re just here, and they’re not gonna get anywhere except here, or the next spot they push them to.”

Some of the men in the gazebo have phones, charged off of the borough’s electric outlet, and others don’t — but all lack one other key to success.

“The thing everybody’s missing here — no mailing address It doesn’t matter if you have a phone, a phone is not a mailing address. All these guys, including myself, need a mailing address. Maybe my insurance never would’ve been turned off, if I had a mailing address, and I said, ‘Send it to here.’ I have no place to send me mail,” he said.

“This is one of the first phones I’ve had in four years. The last phone I had, I gave away to a homeless pregnant woman. But I kept this one, and reached out to my kids. Then I saw a nephew on Facebook, and started talking to him, and started crying. He said ‘Is that you? We thought you were dead, we didn’t know where you were.’ He said, ‘You’re too good of a dude, you shouldn’t be staying in the park.’”

“To anybody in this town, if you see something you don’t like, don’t just (complain) about it, help the situation. Most of us don’t know how to get help. Maybe find out who owns these houses, and how can we get ’em open for this homeless population? Tonight, if I come back, this place might be packed. Or, if it rains, it might not be. I’m hoping that today’s my last day (outside), but I’m not stupid enough to believe there might not be some rough days ahead.”

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