

Regional

An economic argument that affects society

Social workers serve the most vulnerable in our society, people who the general public does not notice – or does not want to notice. Among the most at risk are the homeless. In 2014, 558 people were found to be experiencing homelessness in Madison County, with more than half being children. One person who is working to make these invisible people more visible is Jayme Swanke, an assistant professor in the department of social work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

“I think a lot of folks think, ‘This problem doesn’t impact me. I live in a good community. My family is doing well,’” Swanke said. “But it does impact everybody. If they are not in a stable home, then these kids are bounding from school to school. That costs our school system money every time that a kid changes school.” Money, she added, that could be used to better the overall education system.

Swanke and her students in the social work program work with Madison County Continuum to End Homelessness. She explained that every county or region in the nation as a continuum dedicated to address the problem of homelessness. Each year these continuums conduct a “point in time” count



Jayme Swanke

during the last 10 days of January of the number of homeless in a community.

“Those numbers are reported to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and to Congress,” she said. “Those numbers dictate the funding that our county receives.”

SIUE’s social work department assists the

Madison County Continuum in two major projects a year, the annual count and in Project Homeless Connect, an event that brings together providers of services and the people who need them. This year’s event was held on Jan. 28 in Collinsville. Participants distributed food, clothing and hygiene supplies to attendees. Students participate in a variety of ways, Swanke said. Graduate students organize and plan the event in a course focused on community and neighborhood practice. In the spring undergraduate students volunteer for the count and Project Homeless Connect events.

When asked what comes as the biggest eye opener for students participating in the projects, Swanke said that any pre-conceived notions that they had concerning homelessness are crushed.

“What they picture as an individual who is experiencing homelessness is somebody who is mentally ill, addicted to a substance or just a bum,” she said. “They don’t think of somebody who’s probably working one or two jobs and has a family and maybe got sick, is behind on their rent or who lost their job because they got sick. What students learn is this can happen to anybody. If you hit a

bump in the road and you get behind, then this could be your family.”

She pointed to some of the social and financial costs related to homelessness. The social cost to families is high—instability, insecurity, tension and conflict – and are particularly hard on children. There are financial costs to taxpayers and health care providers, as well, when families are unstable. Swanke described a connection between homelessness and higher health care and educational costs, as well as issues of employability and crime that can follow in the wake of unstable families.

Swanke described a program called “Rapid Re-housing,” which focuses on keeping people in their homes, helping them to not experience homelessness in the first place. The program provides short-term rental assistance so the family can get on their feet and keep their home. The benefits to this program are both economic and social, Swanke added. Economically, it’s cheaper to keep people in their housing than provide services after the fact. Socially, family stability is increased and this prevents some of the consequences described above.

“Let’s say somebody lives in Collinsville

Kathleen Tunney College Talk

and has a job there. If they lose their apartment and have to go into shelter in Granite City, how will they get to their job? How will kids get to school? If somebody in the family loses their job, then the family has been set back even further,” she said.

When asked what she would do if she had a magic wand to fix the problem of homelessness, Swanke answered, “We need enough services for everybody—not just those who are the worst off, but the middle class families who struggle to pay the day care bill, for families who are trying to manage without assistance. It’s hard. It leads to cynicism, the mentality that, ‘No one’s helping me, why should I help them?’ We need a different value system.

“It’s not just a soft-headed argument that we should help people,” she said. “It’s an economic argument that affects society.”

Kathleen Tunney, is the Chair of the Department of Social Work at SIUE