

Homeless Residents Work For Second Chances In Wealthy DC Suburbs

A local nonprofit seeks to transform the lives of the homeless. It's a daunting task in Fairfax County, a costly place to live.

By [Emily Leayman](#) | Aug 12, 2019 5:29 pm ET | Updated Aug 12, 2019 6:09 pm ET

FAIRFAX, VA — As cars fill up the roads for the Thursday morning rush hour, ten people were already hard at work at Fairfax City's Thaiss Park. They're the ones painting park benches, removing weeds and other laborious tasks. They're also homeless in one of the most affluent counties in the country.

"I played in these fields," said Eddie Weaver, pointing at the baseball field behind where he's working. The Northern Virginia native has been homeless for since he was hospitalized from a complication with diabetes medication last fall. That hospitalization led to problems with paying his landlord. Before long, a man who had a three-bedroom home and made over \$200 per day at his job lost it all. "I've always had money, rented houses out or let people stay," he said of his life before homelessness.

Now he's one of the workers in the City Jobs program paid \$10 per hour to do work such as clearing weeds, picking up trash, painting park benches and tables, and even putting up holiday decorations in downtown Fairfax.

City Jobs is a partnership between Fairfax City and the Lamb Center, a social services organization helping the homeless and people transitioning into housing in an increasingly expensive area to live. The program has been running Tuesdays and Thursdays since November 2018.

The Lamb Center isn't a homeless shelter, but there's a reason dozens of people line up before it opens each day at 8 a.m. with breakfast ready. Stick around all day and you'll see guests use services like showers, laundry, a clothing closet, case managers, a nurse, dental care and more.

Others will come in as early as 6 a.m. — they want to get in showers and laundry before going to work or job interviews. Whether they're homeless or have housing but can't pay for laundry, these services can make a difference. As does the ability to use the Lamb Center's address for job applications and other services.

The Lamb Center started out as a service run above a pawn shop with around 55 daily visitors on average. This year, it will celebrate its 27th anniversary in a larger location with over 100 daily visitors. In the last fiscal year, the Lamb Center drew 1,612 unique visitors, Deacon Dave Larrabee, the director of operations, told Patch. The center sees repeat guests, but there are "always new faces coming in here."

The Lamb Center runs on a team of 10 staff members and about 150 regular volunteers with support from local churches. In fact, over 100 churches have helped in some form since 2008. Different churches take responsibility for providing the daily meals.

Some services depend on the day. Tuesdays and Thursdays are usually busier, since that's when the nurse and clothing closet are available. Once Northern Virginia Community College's fall session begins, an instructor and students will offer dental services to Lamb Center guests.

At Lamb Center, the days start and end with prayer, and guests have the choice to join Bible studies and use the Chapel. "We look at the physical and spiritual needs of our guests," Larrabee explains.

Challenges of Homelessness in a Costly Area

For one day each year, jurisdictions in the greater DC area record the number of people experiencing homelessness for a point-in-time count. Fairfax County, the most populous county in the state, is second to DC in the numbers of homeless residents. The county — including numbers from the cities of Fairfax and Falls Church — recorded 1,034 homeless people in 2019, up from 987 in 2018. Most other DC-area counties and cities saw a decline from the last year.

The Lamb Center is located within Fairfax County, often identified as one of the richest counties in the U.S. The Economic Policy Institute's new Family Budget Calculator says a family of four needs \$114,105 per year, or \$9,509 per month for a "modest yet adequate" standard of living. For some,



that's not worrisome — the median income for Fairfax County between 2013 and 2017 was \$117,515, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. For homeless people, it's way out of reach.

Consider someone like Emmett, one of the homeless City Jobs program workers. The City Jobs program pays \$40 per day for four hours of work. If he works twice a week, that equates to \$320 per month.

"You can't rent an apartment. You can't buy a car. What investment can you make with that kind of money?" he said.

A program like City Jobs can be more of a stepping stone to get a job and more income. The program's purpose is to employ individuals who are proven at working hard, being on time and collaborating as a team, and to prepare them for employment. According to Larrabee, Fairfax County is considering its own work program.

Emmett has been able to secure three jobs so far this year, but personal struggles led him to quit. He cites missed education as one of the factors leading to his homelessness, and he would jump on opportunities to advance his education.

Eric Wright, who has experienced homelessness on and off for a decade, says he got a job at a local garden center because of the work program. He's no longer there because business was slow, but he could have the option of continuing in the fall. "It ain't the problem of keeping the job. It's getting the job that's the problem," he said.

Larrabee says it can be hard for the homeless to get into housing on a minimum wage or part-time job. He's seen some Lamb Center guests get into housing but doesn't believe there are enough resources available. "It might seem like the system is working against you," he said.

Housing: A True Sense of Security?

As City Jobs workers began the day cleaning up Thaiss Park, Eric Hanemann told them to come to him if they needed help identifying poison ivy. Often called the "lead supervisor" of the group, he provides tips like this for his fellow workers, along with the Fairfax City staff who assign their work for the day. Hanemann has plenty of experience in landscaping, as he used to work for Fairfax City's parks and recreation department. Over the years, he's experienced homelessness on and off, but now he and his wife are in housing.

Hanemann and his wife first met at a hypothermia shelter run by a church, and she moved to a campsite he set up once the shelter closed for the season. They married in July 2009 and recently celebrated their anniversary. It's been no easy journey; they've gone from living at the campsite to securing and losing housing, and living in a campsite and a van.

One of the buildings where they rented an efficiency unit was torn down. At one point, a county worker arranged for them

to stay on Burke Lake Park property until they could get back into housing.

They got back into housing in 2012 when Hanemann's wife started receiving disability benefits. His work for City Jobs, occasional work for a property manager and her job at Safeway wasn't enough, but the disability benefits allowed them to afford a place to live.

"If it weren't for that, we probably would have went back on the streets," said Hanemann.

For the Hanemanns, housing gives them a place to prepare meals, shower and sleep without being harassed. What it doesn't give is a sense of a certain future.

Their latest housing is a basement of a home their landlord transferred them to. But in early August, the landlord gave them a 45-day notice to leave. He's notified Lamb Center to assist with his search.

"If I didn't have faith, I would say it pretty much wouldn't be possible," Hanemann said.

Weaver is awaiting his own chance to move into housing. For now, he goes between churches and the Lamb Center for the necessities. Once the Lamb Center is closed at 3 p.m. on weekdays and 12:30 p.m. on Saturdays, people like him are on their own.

When Weaver first became homeless, he stayed at a hypothermia shelter for the winter. Now he's taken up in a shack he built in the woods. He'd prefer to stay overnight closer to City Jobs work sites in Fairfax, but fear creeps in when he considers staying out in the open. That could soon change, as he's gotten into a housing program and currently on a waiting list.

Still, he can't help remembering how easy it was to afford housing when he shared costs with others. He used to split rent with his wife, uncle and father-in-law, but they have all died. Other friends have died or left the area, and his parents are in retirement homes. He says, "I'm just stuck on my own."

This is the first story in a series about affordable housing and homelessness in Fairfax County. If you or someone you know experienced homelessness and would like to share your story, email Emily.Leayman@patch.com.