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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Individuals should lend helping hand to homeless



There is a number here in Michigan that tells an alarming story -- the number seven. That's the average age of a homeless person in our state.

Seven years old.

That means the typical homeless person is a first- or second-grader, someone who should be learning to read and ride a bike, not someone who should be worried about where they will sleep that night.

But don't look for any 7-year-olds pushing shopping carts through deserted streets. These homeless don't fit the stereotype, though the challenges they face are very real. So quiet is their descent into homelessness that you may not have noticed them, but as public school employees, we see them in every district, in every community and in every walk of life.

Rebecca and her family are typical. When she and her husband lost their home to foreclosure, they moved in with her cousin, grateful to have that option.

But the move was devastating. They had worked hard to make a life for themselves, with decent jobs and a roof over their heads. Then something happened. For them, it was a layoff, but for other families, it can be as simple as a car breaking down, an unexpected medical bill or a house payment that skyrockets.

Whatever the reason, Rebecca -- like so many others here in Michigan -- suddenly found that "one paycheck away from disaster" was indeed upon her.

And the reality is that Rebecca and her husband aren't the only ones reeling from this abrupt change. Their three children were yanked from their friends and teachers and forced to start

over mid-year in a new school in a new town, uncertain if they'd even be there long enough to find their way around. All of which puts them at risk of never earning their high school degree.

We heard it over and over at a series of dropout hearings last year -- what happens outside the classroom has an enormous impact on what happens inside. As educators, we cannot afford to see these students slip through the cracks.

Students like Rebecca's youngest child, who happens to be 7.

She and her sister and brother are part of a growing group of homeless kids looking to our schools as a haven in uncertain times. And the members of the Michigan Education Association are meeting this challenge as best we can.

From the bus driver with a reassuring smile to the food service employee who might serve the only meal a child gets that day, we know that these students are facing more than just typical childhood worries. They need help --and that's why our members in Shiawassee County have raised enough money to give away a semi-truckload of food next weekend.

Four hundred families like Rebecca's will have enough to eat, thanks to efforts of teachers, support staff, administrators and students. It's just one example of the many projects members of the Michigan Education Association are organizing to help the communities we live in.

We're encouraging our ranks to get involved, and we need you to get involved as well.

Only when our entire community gets together to address the problem of homeless children and families here in Michigan will we truly be able to find real solutions. Yes, we need lawmakers, corporations and social service agencies, but we also need ordinary people -- all of us -- to care enough to volunteer our time in a soup kitchen or donate money to a women's shelter or write a letter in support of affordable housing projects. There are many ways to get involved, and the time to take action is now.

Tough times often present an opportunity for real change. Join the Michigan Education Association and our members and make this the time you reach out to lend a helping hand.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff. Please e-mail comments to letters@detnews.com.

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