

Justice & Advocacy



November 2022 Vol. 2, No. 3

Justice & Advocacy Committee

The Lehigh Conference of Churches

An occasional newsletter for our Lehigh Valley church congregations

Contents

- **Hungry and Homeless: What Should We Do?** 1
- **Hungry and Homeless in the Lehigh Valley** 1
Why and what we Can Do about it
- **Healing Our Borders Vigil**
Water Walk in the Desert. 3



- **Resources: Responding to Racism and Violence** 3
- **Other Resources and Events** . . . 4
 - **Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week** (Nov. 12-20, 2022)
 - **U.S. government programs that keep people out of poverty**
 - **COP27** (Nov. 6-18 in Egypt)
Church engagement in Climate Change negotiations & planning



What justice and/or advocacy issues has your church worked on lately? We'd love to feature your story!

Justice & Advocacy News

ja.news@ja.ppjr.org

<http://ja.ppjr.org>

Hungry and Homeless - What Should We Do About It?

John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

- Luke 3:11

But [Jesus] answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" - Mark 6:37

The social problems that confront us today are so immense that they sometimes seem intractable. Isn't that why we elect political leaders – so they can figure out what to do about hunger and homelessness? But the Gospels don't let us off the hook so easily. If any of us has more than enough for our immediate needs, but our neighbor does not, God expects us to share what we do have. And if the need seems overwhelming, we can be creative – working collaboratively with other folks in our community to find ways to meet the basic needs of all our neighbors.

Hungry and Homeless in the Lehigh Valley Why and What We Can Do About It

by Robert Walden

The Lehigh Valley, like much of the nation, has been facing a rapidly growing demand this year for emergency food and housing assistance, as funding for COVID-related state and federal programs has been winding down. Food insecurity was high (about 10% of Lehigh Valley households) and increasing prior to the COVID epidemic, but this year demand for emergency food has exploded.

Allentown Area Ecumenical Food Bank		
Month	August 2021	August 2022
Households Served	676	2,028

The Lehigh Conference of Church's Conference Kitchen, which offers three meals a day Monday through Friday, now serves daily breakfast and dinner to almost 100 people and lunch to about 140 people.

The demand for food assistance reflects in part the rising cost of housing; rents in Lehigh Valley communities have gone up typically by 40 to 50 percent in the past three years, and the median price of homes for sale has risen almost as much.

Longer term issues have contributed to the current crisis, too. Most of Pennsylvania's psychiatric facilities, including Allentown State Hospital closed a dozen years ago without providing alternative supportive housing for former residents,

(continued on page 2)

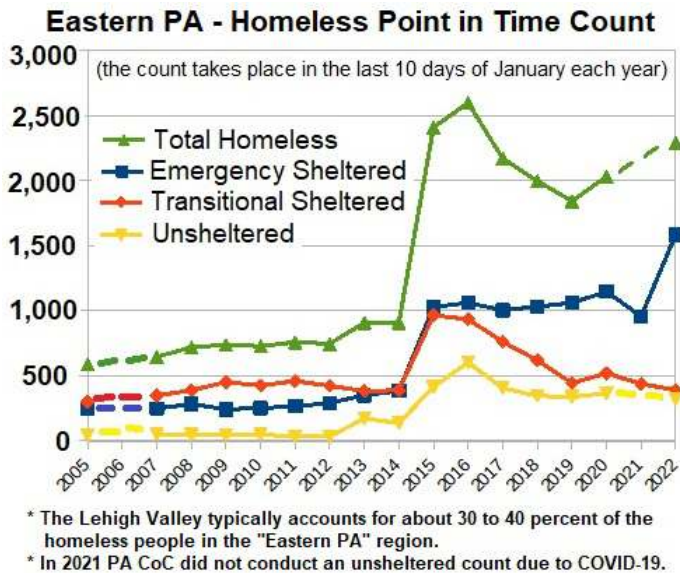
Hungry & Homeless ... (continued from page 1)

so that now people with significant mental disabilities often end up homeless or in jail.

Also, Pennsylvania is one of 20 states that has not raised minimum wage above the federal rate set 13 years ago of \$7.25 per hour, so that wages have not kept up with cost of living for many workers.

Eviction filing rates were high and rising prior to the COVID epidemic (affecting 11.2% of Lehigh Valley renters in 2019); however the Pennsylvania and CDC eviction moratoriums in 2020 and renter assistance programs have temporarily reduced the number of eviction filings more recently.

The many Lehigh Valley agencies that provide housing-related assistance have been putting progressively more resources into keeping people sheltered, especially during the COVID pandemic, but as reflected in the annual Point in Time (PIT) count, the need still exceeds available resources.



The Russia-Ukraine War, the COVID pandemic, and rising inflation are all contributing to the current hunger and housing crisis, but there is more to the story.

Rapidly rising housing costs during COVID began when businesses asked employees to vacate office buildings and work from home. Many workers took the opportunity to move from metropolitan areas like New York City or Philadelphia to places like the Lehigh Valley with its relatively much lower cost of living. Also, Wall Street venture capital firms no longer found it profitable to invest in new office buildings, so turned to residential real estate, buying up retail rental properties, raising rents to generate more income to buy yet more properties – and these acquisitions have often been financed on favorable terms through federal loan agencies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Eviction Filings in 2019

Location	Renter Households	Eviction Filings	Filing Rate
Lehigh County	49,355	6,300	12.8%
Northampton Co.	32,682	2,912	8.9%
Allentown ZIP: 18102	11,392	2,622	23.0%
Pennsylvania	1,572,128	116,287	7.4%

What We Can Do About It

There are, of course, many options for individuals, groups, and congregations to respond to the immediate need for emergency food and safe affordable housing.

- There is always a need for volunteers and donations to assist local food pantries and soup kitchens
- Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity need volunteers to help with construction of new homes and renovation of older homes in need of repairs or weatherization.
- Funding for programs that provide food and housing assistance comes primarily from federal, state, and local governments; and citizen advocacy can significantly influence spending priorities.

– For example, last month when the 2023 Lehigh County proposed budget was up for public discussion, local citizens attended the Board of Commissioners meeting to speak in favor of a budget amendment to allocate \$200,000 for eviction prevention. After extended testimony, Commissioners approved the amendment unanimously.

– Also, local governments are still making decisions about the use of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, and Bethlehem, for example, has recently asked for public input to set priorities for allocating the city's share of ARP funds, including the possibility of a year-round homeless shelter.

– Member agencies of the Lehigh Valley Regional Homeless Advisory Board (LVRHAB) have been working together cooperatively to assist people facing homelessness, but it's time for regional municipalities – city, township, and county governments and planning commissions – to begin working together to prioritize construction of affordable housing while providing transitional housing and services for people at risk for homelessness.

- All of these responses are necessary but do not address the root issue of structural inequality which enables a relatively small number of people to accumulate enormous wealth (and multiple homes) at the expense of everyone else – especially the most vulnerable people in our communities. We'll have more to say about this in forthcoming newsletters.

(continued on page 4)

At the Border in Douglas and Agua Prieta Water Walk in the Desert - Part 1

Sheila Clever attended The Borderlands Learning Tour hosted by the Mennonite Central Committee May 23-29.

Here is a reflection from one of the educational opportunities she participated in.

At first, when Janet Reno started Operation Gatekeeper, which put lines of police in the biggest cities along the border to prevent migrants from crossing, she assumed the desert would hinder migration. The *Prevention Through Deterrence Program* is now 28 years old.

It hasn't been working so far. The police lines turned into fences. The fences changed to walls. The walls got taller. Concertina wire enhanced the "deterrence" effect – and deaths. Double walling began with Biden. And yet, they still come.

The wall ranges from 15 feet to 30 feet. The Trump administration tried to put up new wall in October 2020. The land was cleared and flattened; roads were made. One of the nearby mountains was dynamited causing severe ecological damage. Even here, 60 miles from the border, there are pipes under the road to carry water to prevent erosion. Portions of the wall were erected - 18 sections were put up – but it wasn't finished before Trump left office, so in between the sections, are gaps. And in some places, the wall is starting to fall since little engineering was done before the wall was put up.



The first 25 miles of the border from Mexico is filled with cameras, motion sensors, and lights. Beyond that, Border Patrol monitors the area. In the Trump administration, Border Patrol was everywhere; it was clearly being used as an intimidation factor. In the

Biden administration, Border Patrol is less visible, but they don't need to be. Cameras are everywhere, here, too, 60 miles from the border. They can see groups of migrants from a comfortable and air-conditioned office. When they do, a helicopter can be used to scatter and scare the migrants, who are then easily captured. Border Patrol uses helicopters to herd migrants – like cattle. Dust is stirred up by the blades and people have to lie flat on the ground to keep from choking. Those that are able, run away and hide in the brush. We were given an unsolicited demonstration by a Border Patrol helicopter when we were eating lunch. The helicopter circled the adjacent ball field and hovered over the field for 20-30 minutes, stirring up dust.

There are about 100 migrants shot to death each year by Border Patrol. There are hundreds of thousands of cases of abuse by Border Patrol agents. One name they give to migrants is "Tonks." This is the sound made when a skull is being crushed by a flashlight.

What is really a miracle is that some people make it to this desert we are standing in.

Resources: Responding to Racism & Violence

- **The Cost of Racism to White Americans**

John H. Bracey (recorded lecture, U. Mass, Amherst)

<https://www.umass.edu/afroam/cost-racism-white-america-john-h-bracey>

- **Normalizing Injustice: The Dangerous Misrepresentations that Define Television's Scripted Crime Genre** (Color of Change: Jan. 2020)

Television's most popular genre excludes writers of color, miseducates people about the criminal justice system and makes racial injustice acceptable. NCIS, Lethal Weapon, Elementary, The Blacklist, Blindspot, Blue Bloods, Chicago P.D. and Law & Order: Special Victims Unit are among the worst offenders.

Report and 4-min. Video Summary:

<https://hollywood.colorofchange.org/crime-tv-report/>

- **Community Safety Beyond Policing:**

Understanding 'Copaganda' (AFSC webinar)

(recorded: October 20, 2022 87 min.)

<https://www.afsc.org/action/csbp-understanding-copaganda>

- **Staring Down the Barrel: What Happened to Our Communities when Gun Control Failed**

(Amistad Law Project: October 2022)

<https://amistadlaw.org/get-informed/move-it-forward-podcast>

Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week (November 12-20, 2022)

Every year thousands of Lehigh Valley families face the threat of eviction, and now that COVID-related state and federal emergency assistance programs are ending, many more individuals and families are facing food insecurity, eviction, and homelessness.

The Lehigh Conference of Churches (LCC) has organized a week of dialogue, discussion, and games, culminating in a sleep-out event, to raise awareness and understanding of what it's like to live in extreme poverty.

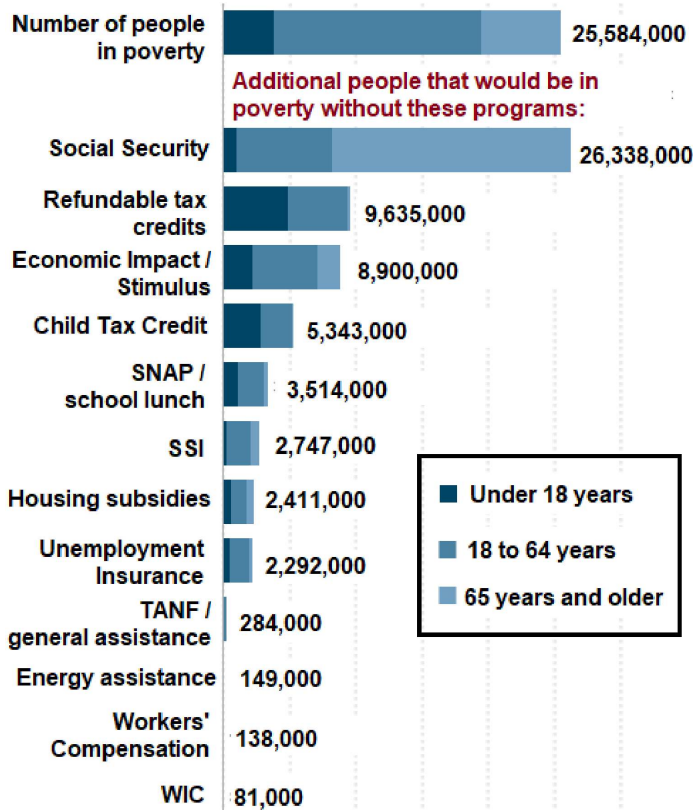
The week's events will also provide resources for public policy advocacy and include fundraising to assist people living in our community with food, housing, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future.



See the details and sign up for the week's events at <https://lehighchurches.org/events/>

• U.S. government programs that keep millions of people out of poverty

Number of people in poverty, as measured by the Supplemental Poverty Measure, and additional number that would be in poverty without specified government program, by age group, 2021



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of John Creamer, Emily A. Shrider, Kalee Burns, and Frances Chen, Poverty in the United States: 2021, U.S. Census Bureau report #P60-277, Sept. 2022. www.epi.org/blog/pandemic-safety-net-programs-kept-millions-out-of-poverty-in-2021-new-census-data-show/

Hungry & Homeless ... (continued from page 2)

• **Please contact us** (ja.news@ja.ppjr.org) if you would like help connecting with any of the activities mentioned above. Also, please join us for Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week activities (*see announcement on this page*).

Climate Change: COP27 <https://cop27.eg>

The 27th session of the Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27), is in progress November 6-18 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. Several U.S. church denominations that are sending representatives to COP27 are offering free webinars and other resources about the Conference proceedings:



• Ahead of COP27, faith leaders back global treaty to end the use of fossil fuels

(National Catholic Reporter - Nov. 3, 2022)

<https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/ahead-cop27-faith-leaders-back-global-treaty-end-use-fossil-fuels>

A letter issued Nov. 2 and signed by more than 50 religious institutions, representing millions of members worldwide, urges nations to develop, adopt and implement a "Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty" that would immediately halt expansion of new fossil fuel projects, outline a road map for a fair and equitable end to existing fossil fuel production, and ensure a "just transition" to 100% renewable energy globally by providing economic and technological assistance to communities and countries who need it, particularly in the Global South.

• United Methodist Church – webinars from Egypt) – Nov. 10 and Nov. 17 (Thursdays at 1pm)

<https://www.umcjustice.org/articles/preview/d8b80c4a-6ad9-4207-bc23-05c537af3f9e>

This year's gathering, COP27, provides an opportunity to assess countries' progress in implementing their pledges under the Paris Agreement and to scale up our collective commitment to reduce emissions and assist communities impacted by the climate crisis.

• Episcopal Church – webinars

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/cop27/>

– **Nov. 1** recorded webinar: Episcopal Climate Advocacy at the UN: COP27 Kick-Off with the Presiding Bishop's Delegation

– **Nov. 30** (Wednesday. at 12n) Episcopal COP27 Closing Event and Report Back from Delegates

• United Church of Christ - webinar

– **Nov. 9** (Wednesday, 1:00-2:00pm)

Centering Africa at COP27

<https://www.ucc.org/event/centering-africa-at-cop27>