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Allison Henry works with the homeless population, connecting them with needed resources: 2022 Newsmakers

2022 NEWSMAKERS



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STAUNTON — Allison Henry hadn't been in her position very long. An outreach worker for the homeless community, Henry works for the Valley Community Services Board. One cold night in January, 2021, she was working with some clients, helping them fill out paperwork.

One of the men sitting nearby had been very quiet the entire time Henry was there, eventually standing up and walking into his tent. A few seconds later he emerged with a jacket that he placed over Henry, never saying a word.

Over time, Henry has realized that's not unusual.

"I feel so nurtured in their presence," she said. "My energy feels supported by their energy. And yeah, it's incredible. I am amazed every single day at people's resilience, at their ability to help each other."

Henry works daily with those in the homeless population, both those with and without mental health issues, helping them get benefits and connecting them to doctors, food stamps, Medicaid, apartment applications and more. She finds as many resources as she possibly can.

Because of this work, Henry is one of our 2022 News Leader Newsmakers. Each year our newsroom profiles people who may not be heavily in the public eye, but are part of the key pool of citizens moving forward the projects and topics our area cares about.

"A large part of that is building rapport," Henry said. "I've been told that has made me very successful with my position, my ability to build rapport."



Allison Henry works for Valley Community Services Board as an outreach worker for the homeless population in the area.
Patrick Hite/The News Leader

People don't become homeless overnight. Henry said many have been reaching out for help for months or years with no success. So when she comes along and offers to help they have doubts and it takes Henry time to earn their trust. That's one of the reasons Henry said she's never on time for anything, because she can't operate on a set schedule. If she's talking with a client, someone who maybe for the first time opens up to her, she can't look at her watch and say, well, gotta go. She takes as much time as is needed.

And there's not another Allison Henry who can pick up the slack. Henry is quick to point out there are other organizations that offer help to those experiencing homelessness, but at Valley Community Services she is the only person with her job position.

"I don't have an assistant, I don't have a counterpart," she said. "I'm the only one."

Henry mainly covers Staunton, Augusta County, Waynesboro and Highland County, although because there is not a similar position to the south she can also go into Rockbridge County where she'll try to connect people to services in that area if available.

It can be a daunting task, but Henry has overcome challenges before.

FINDING HER OWN PATH

Henry grew up in Front Royal. She didn't like school, finding the material difficult and just generally struggling academically. She thinks those struggles caused her to act out, calling herself a "problem student" who didn't take anything in school seriously.

She isn't sure why but her principal took an interest in helping her, constantly telling her that she could succeed. He also encouraged her to apply to his alma mater, Bridgewater College. Henry never thought she'd go to college.

"I had a terrible GPA in high school," Henry said. "I didn't think school would be something that I could be successful at, but he really encouraged me to apply and so I did. And I got in. It was the one school I got in and it was the one he went to. So I was like, well, I guess it was meant to be."

The only thing she really cared about at the time was helping other people. She had spent time in high school, and then college, helping friends who were struggling, so she decided to study social work.

Allison Henry works for Valley Community Services Board as an outreach worker for the homeless population in the area.

"I never really considered anything else," she said.

The one thing that surprises her about the career path she took, working for Valley Community Services Board, is ending up in the mental health field. She's had struggles with her own mental health and really didn't think she could help others with similar issues.

"But what's meant for you will find you," she said.

As a senior in college, Henry did an internship with Blue Ridge Court Services in Staunton, and while it was a good experience she realized working directly with the justice system wasn't for her. What she noticed, though, were clients of the nonprofit organization getting treatment through Valley Community Services Board. That intrigued her, a place that directly helped people.

She approached a supervisor at Valley Community Services Board about a possible internship and was told while they'd never had an intern before, they were open to trying it. While still in college, and working three jobs, she took on a 20-hour a week internship.

Eventually she was asked if, since she was there anyway, she'd like a small caseload to make some extra money. Henry still remembers getting a \$600 paycheck for part-time work and just sobbing with happiness.

"Oh my gosh, they're really gonna pay me to do this," she remembers thinking. "Like, they're gonna pay me to help people? Like I've been doing this forever for free and they're just going to pay me? It felt kind of like Dax Shepard and Ashton Kutcher were gonna come out and tell me I've been Punk'd."

That was March of 2019. She joined Valley Community Services Board full-time three months later. She began at the same time the organization was starting its permanent supportive housing program, which helps people find affordable housing and offers support services. It's a program that Henry now uses to help her clients find homes.

"It's been really cool to kind of grow in my position and my experience and my career alongside the homeless and special needs housing program," Henry said. "We've kind of grown up together."

At first Henry was a mental health case manager working with the general population who qualified for services. From there she became the case manager for the permanent supportive housing program before landing her current position in January 2021. She is getting ready to celebrate two years in the role.

Allison Henry works for Valley Community Services Board as an outreach worker for the homeless population in the area.

NEW DAY, NEW CHALLENGE THERE IS NO TYPICAL DAY IN THIS JOB.

"Every day is very, very different," Henry said. "And every day I don't know what's going to happen when I get there."

She spends time with both the unsheltered population and those in shelters like the Valley Mission or WARM or domestic violence shelters, although she said most of her time is focused on people who are unsheltered. People in a shelter, she said, often have access to a case manager there. If you're outside, chances are you don't have anyone to help.

Explaining her day, Henry began a sentence by saying, "What I usually do ..." then stopped. "Usually" didn't make her comfortable because, again, no day is the same.

One somewhat consistent part of her job is stocking supplies.

"There's not a ton of funding for supply stuff in my position," Henry said. "But that is something that local agencies are incredible about is getting me connected with any supplies that I might need. And so I try to stock my car at the beginning of the week with a bunch of stuff."

At any one time in her car you may find tarps, blankets, candles, lighters, flashlights, snacks, hats, gloves, hair ties, and hygiene products, like body wipes or tampons and pads.

"Tents are the hot commodity, but they go quick," she said. "And I try to ration those out the best I can because tents are the most expensive item and the most sought after item."

Tents are not meant to live in and so they become unlivable quickly for people sleeping outside any length of time. It's not just the person in the tent, but all of their belongings, and the tent has to withstand the weather, so rain or snow or wind.

"They joke around with me because I like to get these pop-up tents," Henry said. "Some people love the pop-up tents but most people, especially if you've been doing this for a long time, hate them because they're impossible to pack up. But I get them because not everyone I work with is physically able to put a tent together."

FINDING CLIENTS

There's not list of people who are experiencing homelessness. Most of the clients Henry works with she found, either in passing while working with another client or through word of mouth when a current client tells her about someone sleeping here or sleeping there.

When people learn they can trust Henry and realize she has their best interest at heart, they want to connect her with their friends. They want others to be able to take advantage of the work she does.

She also might see a section of woods that looks like a place people might try to find shelter or a shed that looks lived in, maybe with a worn path to it. She'll go check it out and, sometimes, she finds people.

"It's just kind of snowballed over time," Henry said. "My caseload, if you will, is always growing because the more people I meet the more people I meet."

One question Henry gets a lot is how many people are experiencing homelessness. She doesn't have a good answer because it changes daily. Maybe someone is sleeping on a friend's couch for a few nights or maybe someone picks up and leaves for another county. If she had to guess, Henry said she's working with about 80 unsheltered people at anyone one time.

"There's more than that, right? There's always going to be people out there that I don't know about," she said. "That's what keeps me up at night is who didn't I meet with today."

Every January the US Department of Housing and Urban Development conducts what is called a point-in-time count across the nation, reporting the number of sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness on one night. Locally, Henry has been the coordinator for that the past two years.

"We go out and count all the unsheltered people we know about and anyone we encounter," she said. "The shelters turn in their numbers that night. And they do it in the wintertime because that's when the most people are in shelters."

Henry expects the numbers to be higher this year than in the past as the trickle down effect of COVID impacts more people. She said many people will feel the impact of lost income more now, especially with the moratorium on evictions no longer in place.

"We're seeing such significant increases in rent in this area that people aren't able to afford it," she said. "And so you get behind on rent, you lose your income because of COVID or have family members with income pass away because of COVID and then you can't afford it."

No one is immune from the possibility of experiencing homelessness.

"I work with people with master's degrees," Henry said. "I work with people of all ages. I work with people younger than me. I work with people in their 70s and everywhere in between. It can literally happen to anyone. You might think you know who homeless people are, but you don't. It can happen to anyone."

A GOOD FIT

When approaching someone she's not had contact with before, Henry is careful not to walk directly up to them, saying that would be the equivalent of a stranger just walking

in her house. She respects their privacy. She also doesn't go in with a sense of entitlement, feeling like she's there to help and the person should be happy about that.

"I'm here to meet this person where they are and what they want help with," she said. "And what they don't want help with is fine. Like, I can't have my own agenda when I come in to help people."

While she has met people who don't want help, most are open to some assistance or at least having a conversation about what help is available. Henry is willing to have that talk. She works to make them feel in control because they should be in control, she said. It's their treatment and it's their assistance.

"I'm just a vehicle for that," she said. "I don't have a certain place in mind that I want them to get to."

While she never envisioned in college that this would be her exact job one day, she said it's turned out to be a great fit. She likes that she can fight the system from the inside, find ways to make the inaccessible accessible. It can be overwhelming at times, but it's a job she wouldn't trade.

"It has been absolutely amazing," she said. "I personally have never experienced homelessness, but there's something about working with this population that feels very personal to me. I understand what it feels like to feel like an outsider and to feel like you're trying really hard but not getting anywhere. And so I do understand what that feels like and if it's very therapeutic for me to be able to help people."

— Patrick Hite is The News Leader's education reporter. Story ideas and tips always welcome. Contact Patrick (he/him/his) at phite@newsleader.com and follow him on Twitter [@Patrick_Hite](https://twitter.com/Patrick_Hite). Subscribe to us at newsleader.com.