

# The roots of homelessness to often ignored

I am writing in response to the front page article "Homeless in Bangor" (BDN, Nov. 21-22). In addition to offering a monolithically bleak view of the prospects for Bangor's homeless population, sadly, the article offers little or no background concerning the social, political and economic issues underlying the current explosion in the number of homeless people seeking — or not seeking — shelter.

In recent decades, rents have soared relative to meager wage increases. Manufacturing jobs have flown south as a result of North American Free Trade Agreement and Central American Free Trade Agreement. Unskilled wage earners who formerly had the dignity of union membership and the security of negotiated labor contracts now have little recourse but big box stores and fast food restaurants, which maximize corporate profits by hiring only part-time workers to avoid paying employee benefits.

Veterans who return traumatized from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan get little help from Veterans Affairs. Many end up on the streets suffering from PTSD, substance abuse, or worse. And eight years of Republican administration, plus the Reagan and George H.W. Bush years in Washington, have gutted federal social programs, education, affordable housing programs as well as the job training and affirmative action programs that were the hallmark of the '60s and '70s "liberal agenda." The 2008 financial crisis on Wall Street and in the mortgage industry was just the capstone on an already mountainous heap of excuses used to explain the increase in "hard times" for the working class and harder times for the needy. The view that the homeless are just unfortunate individuals who are down and out because of bad luck, laziness, addiction, mental illness or abuse is flawed or at least incomplete. Their



Sheila Holtz

*Those who rule America have come to place personal ambition and corporate profit above the shared values of the social contract.*

situation is symptomatic of a system that is broken. Those who rule America have come to place personal ambition and corporate profit above the shared values of the "social contract," as seen in Europe and most of the developed world.

I myself have lived, worked and-or volunteered at H.O.M.E.-Emmaus in Orland off and on for a decade. Technically speaking, I, too, am homeless. H.O.M.E. has offered me work, community, self-respect and an expanded view of what is possible for me — despite my lifelong mental health issues. It has also educated me about what can be and is being done elsewhere to address poverty and homelessness — and their causes.

H.O.M.E. is an Emmaus community. The Emmaus International Movement was started in Paris after World War II by Abbe Pierre, a French priest seeking to help people whose lives had been devastated by war. Today there are numerous Emmaus communities in Europe, South America, Africa and elsewhere. H.O.M.E. is the only one in North America.

Our community was recently visited by Jane and Paul Bain, representatives from Emmaus in Cambridge, England. The community that they founded there 15 years ago was the first one in the United Kingdom; it serves a population of homeless people recovering from alcoholism. Their community meets its daily operating costs by running a thrift store and recycling operation. During their tenure, Emmaus has expanded widely in the U.K. The Bains wondered why it has not taken off in the U.S. despite massive need.

They have been touring the East Coast for Emmaus, trying to answer that question. At a small gathering recently, Jane said, "We've met many people working for many groups who help the homeless here. They are very good at what they do. But what they do is offer a bed and a meal. They have no vision of anything beyond that."

This is the "Band Aid approach" spoken of in

the BDN article. In contrast, Emmaus — and groups like Emmaus — offer the possibility of long-term stability, community and dignity. At Emmaus Cambridge, Jane and Paul work with homeless alcoholics. In Africa, the needs and the methods are different. There, networks of interconnected communities work together to alleviate the systemic poverty and environmental destruction resulting from centuries of colonial exploitation. Emmaus — and other organizations, like the Global Eco-Village Network, for example — adapt their specific agendas to meet the needs of various locales and populations. The Emmaus International Manifesto defines Emmaus as an organization dedicated to "social and economic reconstruction." This might be seen by some as an overly broad and ambitious goal, but this is what is needed if we really do want to get beyond the "Band-Aid approach." It is too easy for a helping agency, a government agency or a municipality to just throw up its hands in despair and say, "We don't have the funding," "Our budget was cut," or that "The money just isn't trickling down."

I suggest that the city of Bangor contact Jane and Paul Bain at Emmaus International, U.K., and ask them how to start an Emmaus community in Bangor. Or find them online at [www.emmaus-international.org](http://www.emmaus-international.org).

Sheila Holtz of Orland has been involved with H.O.M.E for more than a decade.

**Would you like to help h.o.m.e. continue our 40-year-long work with the rural poor?**

**Join our Mailing List!**

Please mail information to H.O.M.E. Inc,  
P.O. Box 10, Orland, Maine 04472

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_



**Abby's Attic Thrift Shop**  
Route 1, East Orland  
Shop here first!  
Help yourself, h.o.m.e., and th  
environment!

*"Serve First Those Who Suffer Most."  
If you need clothing or household  
items, call Abby's Attic at 469-  
7575.*

*" And as our perceptions are quickened, and as we pray that our faith be in each other, we will see in Christ each other, and we will not lose faith in those around us, no matter how stumbling their progress is. It is easier to have faith that God will support each House of Hospitality and Farming Commune and supply our needs in the way of food and money to pay bills, than it is to keep a strong, hearty, living faith in each individual around us--to see Christ in him."*

- Dorothy Day 1940