

Wendy Metcalfe
VP Content & Editor in Chief
John Breunig
Editorial Page Editor

FORUM

In Fairfield County, stability is more fragile than it looks

By Fernando J. Muñiz

Fairfield County is often associated with prosperity. But prosperity can hide the struggles happening right next door.

A family can have two working parents and still struggle to pay the rent. A senior who has lived independently for decades can suddenly find that a fixed income no longer covers housing, groceries and health care. Someone can have a job, a car, and a home today and still be one unexpected expense away from crisis.

As we recognize World Homeless Day on Oct. 10, we should broaden our understanding of who is struggling and what homelessness and hunger look like in communities like ours.



The latest United Way ALICE data provides a sobering picture. ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These are households earning above the federal poverty level but not enough to afford basic necessities.

According to the 2026 ALICE report, 39% of Connecticut households are below the ALICE Threshold. In the Greater Bridge-

port region, which includes Fairfield, that number rises to 47%.

Nearly half of households in our region are either living in poverty or earning too little to comfortably afford the basics.

Housing is often the largest expense, but families must also pay for food, child care, transportation, health care, and utilities. When those costs rise faster than income, difficult choices follow.

Groceries or the electric bill? A prescription or the rent? A car repair necessary to get to work or this month's child care payment?

We see these pressures every day at Operation Hope. Our food pantry and Community Kitchen address hunger. Our Homeless Response Center provides outreach, crisis intervention, case management, and assistance finding housing. Our affordable and supportive housing programs help people who have experienced homelessness remain safely housed.

These services share a common purpose: helping people maintain or regain stability.

The pressure is also evident in Connecticut's food insecurity numbers. Connecticut Foodshare recently reported that more than 560,000 Connecticut residents experience food insecurity, including more than 137,000 children. That is more than one in seven people in our state.

At the same time, federal changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, are adding pressure. Expanded work requirements affect eligibility for some Connecticut residents.

When SNAP benefits are reduced or lost, however, the need for food doesn't disappear.

It moves somewhere else.

It may move to a food pantry or community kitchen. It may mean skipping meals. Or it may mean taking money intended for rent, utilities or medicine and using it for groceries.

That's why hunger and housing instability cannot be treated as separate problems. They are often different symptoms of the same financial instability.

World Homeless Day should challenge us to think not only about people experiencing homelessness today, but also about what happens before someone loses their home.

Homelessness may begin months earlier with a rent increase, lost job, reduced work hours, medical emergency, or household budget that simply no longer adds up.

That is why prevention matters.

Sometimes preventing homelessness requires significant intervention. Other times, it may mean help with rent, access to food, assistance navigating benefits, mediation with a landlord, or a case manager connecting someone with the right resources.

When prevention works, there is rarely a dramatic story.

There is simply a family that remains housed.

For more than four decades, Operation Hope has been part of the safety net for Fairfield and surrounding communities. Today, our work recognizes that food assistance, homelessness prevention, housing and supportive services are deeply interconnected.

On World Homeless Day, I hope we ask not only how we can better help people experiencing homelessness, but a more ambitious question:

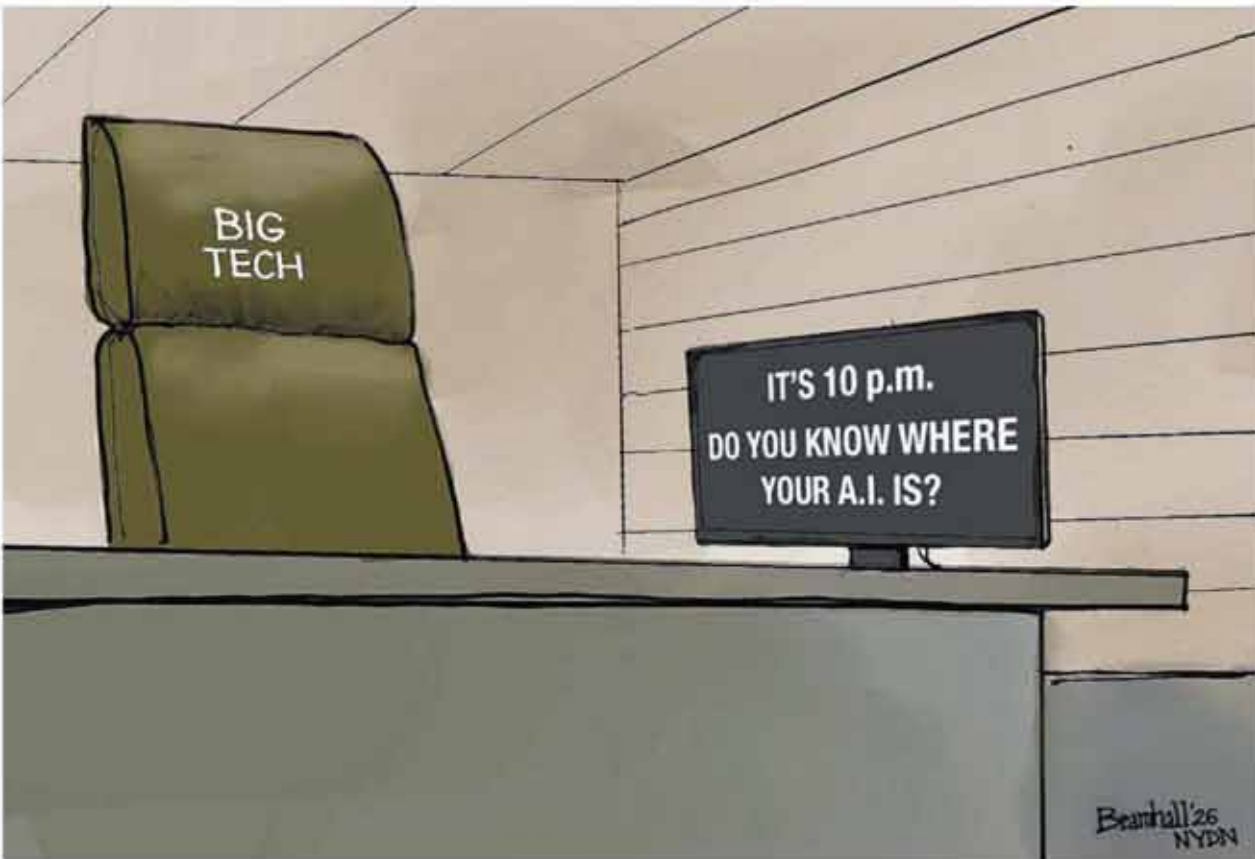
What can we do today to prevent someone from becoming homeless tomorrow?

Fairfield County has extraordinary resources and generosity. Our challenge is to ensure that prosperity creates greater stability for more of our neighbors.

Because the measure of a strong community isn't simply how well its most successful residents are doing.

It's whether we are willing to stand beside our neighbors when stability begins to slip and help them find their footing again.

Fernando J. Muñiz is executive director of Operation Hope of Fairfield, a nonprofit organization working to end homelessness and hunger in Fairfield and surrounding communities.



I've had so many leftovers I can't recall last original meal



JOE PISANI
DID I SAY THAT?

Let me say something I'm going to regret: I hate leftovers.

I don't care where they're from — a trendy Italian trattoria, a Greek diner, Chinese takeout, a burrito bar, a sushi bar, a bar and grille, a brick oven pizzeria or our kitchen.

Chinese never tastes the same the second time around, and microwaved pepperoni pizza gets greasier and kind of limp. And as much as I love sushi, it's horrible once you refrigerate it and the rice becomes brittle.

When I come home from a hard day of work in the salt mines, I'll often whisper in my wife's ear, "Dear, what wonderful gastronomic delights have you prepared for dinner?" And she'll yell in my ear, "We're having LEFT-OVERS!"

"Dear Lord, with LEFT-OVERS again!" Not that, I dash out the front door, screaming through the neighborhood and flailing my arms in search of a freshly cooked meal.

I'm not a wealthy man so I have no business sneering at leftovers. In fact, I probably should be eating your leftovers. (What did you have for dinner last night anyway? That??? Forget it.)

As a kid, whenever my mother served leftovers, I'd pretend to have a stomach ache and get up to leave the table. Then, Mom would yell, "JOJO (sad to say, that's what they called me), children in China wish they had leftover liver and onions, so sit down and start chewing!"

The children in China may have wanted my leftover liver and onions, but even my beloved dog Tevye, named after the Jewish milkman in "Fid-



wwing/Getty Images

ler on the Roof," refused to eat them when I tried to feed her under the table.

Times haven't changed much. Now, my wife yells, "JOE, after what we paid at that over-priced restaurant, we're not wasting a single bite, so start chewing!"

She's right. When you consider the price of food, you have to eat everything on your plate, even if it's the second or third time on your plate for a repeat performance.

Here's a dramatic reenactment of what dinner time was like in our house with four daughters:

WIFEY: "I wonder why Dad isn't home yet. It must have been a busy day in the salt mines."

DAUGHTER 1: "He called and asked what's for dinner, and I told him leftovers."

DAUGHTER 3: "We're having leftovers? Yummy!"

DAUGHTER 4: "He probably went to McDonald's for one of those pretend pork sandwiches."

DAUGHTER 3: Why'd he do that when he could have leftovers?!"

DAUGHTER 2: "We're having leftovers??? I don't feel so good. My stomach hurts."

WIFEY: "Go lie down, dear. More leftovers for the rest of us."

Who invented that word "leftovers" anyway? Maybe they should be

rebranded to something that sounds more appetizing like "pre-served food" or "preserved food."

Of course, there are exceptions. My mother's pot roast and veal parmigiana were heavenly as leftovers. They actually melted in your mouth, unlike her liver and onions, which required a lot of vigorous chewing. Even her meatballs tasted better left over. Not like the meatballs you get in a restaurant, which could be put to better use on the pickleball court.

Let's be honest about this. Leftovers are unappetizing. How can anything as delectable as General Tso's chicken become so chewy and rubbery after a few minutes in the microwave? I bet even the children in China wouldn't eat it. (*If you're wondering who General Tso was, see footnote below.)

My stomach starts to gurggle just thinking about leftover Cobb salad with soggy lettuce soaked in vinaigrette dressing, moist fatty bacon and mushy avocados that look like they were imported from a yet-to-be-discovered planet in a distant solar system, or California during the mudslide season.

But I suppose we old-timers need to eat our leftovers. When I go to the diner, seniors are always leaving with those to-go plastic containers, which will probably be

the next thing the General Assembly wants to tax, along with bags, cans, K-cups and diapers.

The good news is Greek diners are generous with their portions, not like those trendy places, where they play electronic rave music and serve you a plate of bite-sized foofoo food, and then you have to lick the plate because you're still hungry. Don't you hate when you have to lick your plate in public? I do.

With the rising price of restaurant food, I suppose we should be able to take something home, along with a few napkins, sugar packets and coffee creamers. But the wiser approach is to eat everything on your plate the first time around so it's not staring you in the face three days later.

** General Tso, aka Zuo Zongtang, was a 19th century Chinese military leader. The chicken dish named after him was concocted by Chef Peng Chang-kuei in the 1950s. I have a great recipe for a genuine Hunan version of General Tso's chicken. Do you want me to email you a copy?*

(Author's note: For your money, you get a lot with this column — exciting history, free recipes and freshly served nonsense with no artificial ingredients. And no leftovers.)

Former Stamford Advocate and Greenwich Time Editor Joe Pisani can be reached at joe@pisani@yahoo.com.