

# Charitable organizations plan merger to help Fox Cities homeless

[Chris Mueller](#), USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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(Photo: Dan Powers/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

APPLETON - Three organizations that help people experiencing homelessness and housing instability in the Fox Cities will merge Oct. 1.

Homeless Connections, the Fox Valley Warming Shelter and the Housing Partnership of the Fox Cities have approved the merger. The organization that will be formed by the merger has not yet been named.

Joe Mauthe, executive director of the Housing Partnership, has already been named executive director of the new organization. He said the merger "builds on the strengths and historic contributions of each agency."

"It will improve our ability to provide service to those struggling with homelessness and housing instability and will build a stronger, more sustainable agency for the future," he said.

The larger size of the new organization should also be an advantage, Mauthe said.

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The three organizations employ a total of 46 people and serve a combined 2,400 people with programs that include prevention, street outreach and homeless shelter services, as well as transitional and affordable housing. They have a combined revenue of \$3.6 million.

The integration phase of the merger will happen over the next four months and include a branding and naming process. The existing facilities, including both homeless shelters, will continue to operate normally, along with all existing programs. The new organization's administrative office will be at 605 E. Hancock St.

"The specifics are going to be determined gradually as we start working together," said Scott Peeples, executive director of the Fox Valley Warming Shelter.

Peeples and Jerome Martin, executive director of Homeless Connections, will be part of the new organization's leadership team.

"We'll be able to leverage the strengths of three organizations to build an agency that better supports and serves our clients in a way that enhances their ability to succeed," Martin said.

Poverty rates in Wisconsin are slightly lower than the U.S. average, and rates in the Fox Cities are even lower, according to the United Way Fox Cities LIFE Study, which measures demographic, economic, social and health issues in the Fox Cities.

Winnebago County was at a 12.1 percent poverty rate in 2014, while Outagamie County was at 10 percent and Calumet County was at 5.9 percent. The federal poverty threshold that year was an annual income of \$24,008 or lower for a family of four.

But the study, typically updated every five years, also found household income has grown slowly while rent has generally gone up in the region.

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the Fox Cities is only a few hundred, but many more are at risk of being evicted or live in precarious housing situations, Peeples said.

"Then it's a lot of people," he said. "We want to keep working to meet the needs of the population."