



<http://www.newsday.com/opinion/understanding-for-the-homeless-1.3409163>

Understanding for the homeless

December 23, 2011



At the heart of the infancy narratives in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, the sources of the Christian story of what happened two millennia ago in Bethlehem, there's a gritty reality: a family having a hard time putting a roof over its head.

This [Christmas](#), there's a lot of that going around. The same limping economy that's affecting all of us has pushed some of our fellow citizens into homelessness. What better time than a feast focused on a housing-challenged family to make up our minds that we need to help those hurting families -- not shun them.

In this economy, too many families are just one event away from losing the ability to pay the rent or the mortgage: a car that dies, a big medical bill, reduced hours on the job. That helps explain why the numbers of homeless families are rising here. In [Nassau](#), as recently as 2007, the average daily number of homeless families was 95. As of mid-August this year, it was 160, including 37 in motels. In [Suffolk](#), the average this December is 508 families, a sharp increase from the 280 families at the same time in 2008. Those 508 families include 1,026 children. All 52 shelters are full, and the [Department of Social Services](#) is finding again that the only room is at an inn.

For several years, [Suffolk](#) had zero families in motels. That is the preferable number. But now, with the number of homeless families on the rise, the county again has to use motels -- with counseling -- as part of the solution.

Unfortunately, in the weeks leading up to [Christmas](#), there's been something of a no-room-at-the-inn drama in the Town of Southampton. The town is battling [Suffolk's Department of Social Services](#) over the county's decision to use the Hidden Cove Motel in [Hampton Bays](#) for homeless families.

The town board voted to let the town attorney explore litigation against the county, the state

and the federal government. And in early December, Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst wrote letters to the Hidden Cove and other motels. She began with the importance of tourism. Though she didn't exactly say homeless families are bad for tourism, she did mention "an appropriate mix" of restaurants and lodging. She also said the town code said hotel occupancy by the same person is "not to exceed" a month in any calendar year.

The social services commissioner, Greg Blass, is a former Family Court judge who has seen up close the dynamics that make families homeless. In a statement reacting to her letter, he used strong language -- words like "deplorable crusade against homeless families."

At a time when some local residents are actually bringing gifts to the families at Hidden Cove, the town's response has been far less generous. The county has a good record of moving 30 to 40 families a month out of homelessness and into permanent housing. Southampton should let the agency do its work, and drop any plans for a lawsuit.

Mary and Joseph found a stable to have the baby, endured some more rootlessness as refugees in [Egypt](#), then took permanent residence in Nazareth. If the town doesn't interfere, the county can make sure that each family spends as little time as possible at Hidden Cove, then emerges from homelessness and finds a place to set down roots, like the family being celebrated today.

[< back to article](#)