National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week begins Nov. 15, reminding us of both the struggle and the hope for people in our community experiencing homelessness.

On any given night in Montgomery County, over 500 households are without a stable place to call home – they are sleeping in our emergency shelters, outside in a tent or in their cars and other places not meant for housing.

In 2004, County Administrator Deborah Feldman and Dayton City Manager Jim Dineen brought together faith-based organizations, our business community, colleges and universities, healthcare systems, and non-profits to discuss how we could work together to build a network that could address homelessness. At the time, we were all working in silos and each system had their own requirements. There was no clear path to help people move from one stage to another with the goal of arriving at secure housing.

The Homeless Solutions Task Force spent the better part of two years studying a myriad of issues about why people experience the loss of safe and adequate housing. Now, we have a coordinated system where people can seek help from one of five gateways: St. Vincent DePaul’s Shelter for Women and Families, the Gettysburg Shelter for Men, the Daybreak shelter for youth, the YWCA Domestic Violence Shelter, and the Miami Valley Housing Opportunities PATH Street Outreach Program.

While homelessness persists in Montgomery County, many don’t realize that our community has an effective system to address case specific needs and help people achieve housing stability. In 2018, we brought in an independent evaluator to examine our homeless system. One of the key takeaways from their evaluation was, “Montgomery County, Ohio, more than likely has the resources and infrastructure in place to end homelessness but will need to implement changes and utilize resources more efficiently in order to meet this goal.”

This year’s observance of Hunger Homelessness Awareness Week is especially timely because of the pandemic which has led to unemployment for many in our community. Those stressors are then combined with the dangers associated with congregate shelters and lack of access to proper hygiene.
The recognition that housing saves lives, is evident now more than ever as we work together as a community to improve the safety of our emergency shelters by improving social distancing measures. Additionally, we need to help those who do have housing, by making the neighborhoods safe and stable.

Dayton is known for the innovative spirit of the Wright Brothers, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Kettering, Ermal Fraze and Neal V. Loving. Our efforts to end homelessness certainly carry on that tradition of innovation and tenacity. That same spirit can be found in our essential workers who are the backbone of the housing and homeless system.

We have done so much to fight homelessness, yet, we still have so much more to do. And we need your help. Visit our 2020 Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week webpage and find how you can get involved. http://bit.ly/mcHHAW.

-Reverend John Paddock is Co-Chair of the Homelessness Solutions Policy Board