

Dear Health and Human Needs Committee Members:

My name is Bridget Rogers and would like to urge the Health and Human Needs Committee to consider the creation of a Doubled Up Resource Specialist position to help address the unmet needs of our doubled up homeless population. I am writing this letter as a private citizen. Although I speak from my voice as a private citizen, as a professional social worker I see the doubled up population on a regular basis and witness how their needs are not being met or prioritized in our current system.

Families and individuals that are doubled up, meaning they are staying with others often in overcrowded and very tenuous situations, are rarely able to access any services through our current system. They are often overlooked, not seen as vulnerable enough, and not prioritized to receive necessary help. Living in doubled up situations, often from house to house, can be frightening and unsafe for children as well as adults. This must change. In MMSD alone, roughly 80% of homeless students qualify under this category of doubled up/self-paying in hotels (based upon pre-Covid data). That means 80% of homeless school age children in Madison are not receiving the supports they need to gain the housing stability that we know is imperative to be engaged scholars. Given that BIPOC persons are significantly overrepresented in our communities' homeless population, this is also an equity issue to bring enhanced resources to the doubled up portion of our homeless.

*"Families can just go to shelter if they are in such need. These families must be ok staying where they are at if they don't go to shelter. They are better off staying with someone than going to shelter."* These are some of the common misconceptions related to doubled up homeless. These represent false narratives that minimize the struggles of doubled up families and allow us as a community to continue to overlook this extremely vulnerable population. There are many reasons that a family may not have an option except to be doubled up including lack of transportation to the shelter, special needs of family members, limited English proficiency (and lack of linguistically appropriate supports in shelter), mental health barriers, among a multitude of other reasons. Especially for families residing outside of Madison, the transportation barrier is huge. The truth is that even if more families were able to get to shelter, we don't have the capacity to serve them. We must look at alternate strategies to support our doubled up homeless families without requiring them to enter our shelter, and funding a Double Up Resource Specialist is one of those strategies.

The goal of the Doubled Up Resource Specialist is to coordinate and organize resources in such a way to serve the doubled up population while promoting community awareness about this complex and important issue. The Specialist would be instrumental in examining policies and procedures adversely impacting the doubled up population, gather and examine data, and gather ideas from other communities how to effectively serve this group, and seek out new funding sources. The Doubled UP Workgroup, a workgroup of the Homeless Services Consortium with representatives from a variety of community agencies, private citizens and those with lived experience, has been meeting for over a year to raise awareness around this topic and identify next steps. The recommendations of the group for the critical next step is the development of this Doubled UP Specialist position and we respectfully ask you to consider including it in your funding recommendations. I would encourage you to reach out to the Doubled Up Workgroup if you have additional questions related to this important topic.

Respectfully,

Bridget Rogers

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Written Comment for Dane County Health & Human Needs Committee Meeting 4-29-21

My name is Emily Thibedeau. I am a Madison resident, a Community Social Worker in Dane County, and a member of the Doubled-Up Work Group. While I write as a private citizen and not as a representative of my employer, I acknowledge that my work heavily informs my comments. I am writing in support of creating a new resource specialist position to assess and advocate for the needs of the homeless doubled-up population.

People who are homeless and doubled-up are those who stay temporarily with family, friends, or acquaintances because they have no permanent housing of their own; they might also self-pay in a hotel when funds allow. Homeless individuals and families are often left with little choice but to double-up with other households after they have experienced an eviction or non-renewal of a lease; many others find themselves doubling-up because it is so difficult to find truly affordable housing in Madison/Dane County.

While being doubled-up might sound like a preferable alternative to staying on the street or in a car, it comes with significant risks. Homeless individuals and families often endure unsafe relationships or conditions in order to have a place to stay, even temporarily. I have witnessed how difficult it is for people to make plans for their lives when they do not know where they will be able to stay from one day to the next. Additionally, when people double-up with other households, the residents who are on the lease risk are often risking their own housing security by acting in violation of their lease.

Our community does not currently have capacity to shelter all our homeless individuals and families, nor does it have a system in which doubled-up homeless individuals or families are eligible for shelter or housing programs. It is important to note that this is not just a Madison issue, and that many homeless doubled-up families move between Madison and surrounding Dane County communities.

A doubled-up resource specialist position would provide our community with more capacity to assess need, examine how policies and funding sources exclude homeless and doubled-up people from services, promote awareness of this issue, and advocate for much-needed services. Thank you for your consideration.