**Hundreds of Richmonders have nowhere to sleep. One woman who's been there helps them find housing.**

**Destiny** **Hunter** pulled her 1995 Honda Civic into the Sherwood Park neighborhood in North Side, just past the hotel she had spent the last few nights in, and killed the engine.

It wasn't the first time she had no money, no one she could call and no place to go. But she had never resorted to sleeping in her car when temperatures were dipping into the low teens. She bundled herself in a blanket in the driver's seat and closed her eyes.

This wasn't what **Hunter** had pictured for herself.

She, the John Marshall High alumna, was the first in her family to graduate from college. She, the recipient of an associate's degree in culinary arts from ECPI, was working toward her dream of becoming a chef. She, the survivor of a previous stint without shelter while awaiting approval for an apartment she eventually lost, had staved off that feeling of hopelessness many times before.

But as she sat alone that bone-chilling November night with her eyes squeezed shut, trying with every fiber of her being to fall asleep, it overtook her and she began to cry.

"I didn't want to live anymore."

That night - the one the 26-year-old says she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy - wasn't the last time she had nowhere to go. But it is singular in her mind for how it left her utterly desperate, a feeling thousands of people and families who've lost housing across the Richmond region face each year.

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About 820 people were identified as homeless - staying in an emergency shelter or outside in a car, tent or abandoned building - in the Richmond region in 2015, the year that **Hunter** spent that sleepless night in her car. The figure has fallen annually since, according to a biannual census conducted by Homeward, a nonprofit seeking to end homelessness in the region. About 560 people were counted in January.

The downward trend has occurred as the region's homeless services providers have reorganized their efforts around a new method called diversion, said Kelly King Horne, Homeward's executive director.

Instead of funneling each person who calls into one of the region's emergency shelters, the providers work to help them find a safe place to stay with a family member or friend. By filtering out people who have other housing options available, the region's homeless service providers can focus efforts on those who are most vulnerable.

The new strategy has coincided with a growing recognition that simply building more shelter space would not chip away at Richmond's homelessness problem.

"The solution to homelessness is not shelters. It's housing and sustainable housing," said Beth Vann-Turnbull, executive director of Housing Families First. "Looking at shelter as a be-all, end-all, or as the ultimate solution, is shortsighted."

In recent years, the National Alliance to End Homelessness has touted diversion as an effective way to keep people off the streets by reserving shelter beds for those who need them most.

Locally, Horne cites the shifting clientele of the shelter system as evidence of the practice working: Over the past four years, the percentage of people in shelters who previously lived outdoors has doubled.

"It's because we can get people out of crisis more quickly that we're able to respond to the next person in crisis," Horne said.

To coincide with the new approach, the network of homelessness providers narrowed the criteria for a person to qualify for one of the roughly 350 shelter beds available year-round serving Richmond and Chesterfield, Henrico, Hanover, Charles City, Powhatan, New Kent and Goochland counties.

The number grows to about 500 when the city opens its cold-weather overflow shelter, which it does when temperatures are forecast to drop below 40 degrees.

Before, someone within two weeks of losing their home could get a bed. Now, a person must be 72 hours away from becoming homeless, or already homeless, to qualify.

Tasked with executing the strategy are five diversion specialists who staff the region's homeless crisis line, a joint effort by Homeward, Housing Families First, HomeAgain and Area Congregations Together for Service. Calling the crisis line begins a screening process, where the specialists determine whether someone can find housing immediately through their own personal networks.

In 2018, the specialists assisted 6,350 people. About one in five were diverted from the shelter system, according to data made available by Homeward. A portion of the rest end up in a shelter, Horne said. Others may resolve things on their own, but may not notify providers they originally contacted, she added.

Each morning, the specialists arrive to a trove of voicemails from people at their lowest points. The details of the messages vary, but they share a common refrain: Please help.

A woman who is just $200 short of her rent and under threat from her landlord if she doesn't pay it by day's end; a man who has been sleeping outside since his wife kicked him out; a veteran recently released from jail with only a few days left at the shelter where he's been staying, and no plan for what comes next.

The specialists set to work returning each call. Many people they speak to are hoping for a bed in a shelter that night. Others ask about rental assistance. Both are in short supply.

The specialists relay this if asked, then attempt to untangle the personal circumstances that led the person on the other line to call. In action, the approach requires both problem solving and coaching.

"It's never just housing," said Avis Winston, one of the specialists.

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The crisis line began as a pilot project in 2016 with one staffer. A second was added in 2017. Last year, the partnering agencies hired three more diversion specialists and a coordinator to handle the more than 4,000 calls placed to the line each month. Many people call more than once.

Among the diversion specialists hired last year was **Destiny** **Hunter**.

One morning in early January, she fielded a call from a woman seeking a spot in a shelter.

The woman had called the line before, according to a shared computer system in which the network of homeless service providers log personal information with the caller's permission. When someone calls the line for help, **Hunter** can see what services they've accessed and a snapshot of their situation as she works with them.

The woman told **Hunter** she moved to Richmond to stay with her granddaughter, but the arrangement fell through, and she has been homeless since then. She had slept in her car, and a church helped her pay for a hotel for a few nights recently. She didn't have anywhere to go over the weekend.

On this day, there were shelter beds available, but other calls were coming in, too, and **Hunter** could not promise a spot to the woman. She jotted notes while on the phone, then input the information into the shared computer system that shelter coordinators review. Who gets a bed is determined, in part, based on who has been without shelter the longest or is most at risk if they're out on the street.

Getting someone back into a home with a family member or friend is not always possible, but that doesn't mean the specialists' work is done. In those cases, the conversation pivots to other things the person may need, whether it's food, clothing or a place to shower, employment or training opportunities, legal help with a landlord, or advice on how to apply for federal safety net programs.

Toward the end of **Hunter**'s 30-minute conversation with the woman, she told her to call back and check in, whether her situation improved or not. The follow-up call can let the specialists know whether their efforts to divert the person from the shelter system were successful. She closed with words of encouragement.

"What I can say is just hold on tight."

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Soon after **Hunter** spent that November night in her car, she landed a seasonal job at a UPS warehouse and a bed in the Salvation Army shelter.

In early 2016, HomeAgain helped secure an apartment on Chamberlayne Avenue for **Hunter**. She stayed there for a year, but could not afford to renew the lease.

The setback happened at the worst possible time: She was pregnant, and her due date was nearing. **Hunter** delivered her daughter three days after moving out of the apartment, then spent the weekend in a hotel before returning to the Salvation Army shelter.

Through it all, she relied on help from several organizations to regain her financial footing. Among them were Goodwill and ACTS.

"There was resilience about her," said Suzanne Wallis, an ACTS caseworker who assisted **Hunter**.

Last spring, **Hunter** began volunteering as a receptionist for Housing Families First, where her resourcefulness and compassion stood out to the staff, Vann-Turnbull said. As the organization prepared to hire diversion specialists for the homeless crisis line, **Hunter**'s skills and empathy rooted in perspective made her a natural fit.

"She has really shined," Vann-Turnbull said.

These days, **Hunter** wakes up in a two-bedroom apartment in the Mosby Court public housing community that she moved into in March 2017 after her last shelter stay. Those four walls offer stability for her 2-year-old daughter.

In her story lie the obstacles she now helps others navigate by phone. She takes two buses an hour across the city to listen intently each day as people lay out their long odds. In their voices she hears frustration, anger and, at times, the hopelessness she felt that night in her car.

"If I can prevent someone from feeling that way, then that's what I'll do, and I feel like that's my purpose in life," she said.

Shortly after starting the job late last year, **Hunter** typed her name into the computer system the homeless services providers share. Up popped her case file, with its periodic entries dating to 2015, tracing her pathway to that moment

Knowing what she knows now, she considers herself lucky.

If you are in the Richmond area and need shelter, you may contact the Homeless Crisis Line at (804) 972-0813.

**'Sad. Emotional. Degrading.': Why a Richmond-area family's loved one became an 'unclaimed body'**

Miles "**Cookie**" Dandridge's girlfriend tried to shake him awake, but couldn't.

Dead at 59 from clogged arteries, he left no will and no life insurance policy. His surviving relatives didn't know whether he had any money in his bank account.

What they did know was they couldn't afford to bury him. One funeral home told the family they needed $1,100 to cremate him, so for 10 days, his body lay in a cooler at the morgue while they tried to cobble the money together.

Dandridge's younger sister, LaRita, fought tears on the couch in her South Richmond home two weeks after he died, recalling how her daughter had delivered the news; how her brother would have celebrated his 60th birthday in June; how they hadn't spoken recently, the result of a falling-out she could never resolve now.

**Cookie** would take her fishing on the James River and treat her to his signature shrimp quiche. The two had been close, sharing a bond strengthened by the loss of their mother and grandmother. She had leaned on him through those hard times. Now he was gone, and she couldn't bear the thought of him in that cooler.

Uncertainty compounds grief for an untold number of Richmond-area families swept up each year in the state-mandated steps for handling the dead who can't be buried. With next to no public help available to defray burial expenses, relatives of the indigent can only stand by as the government dispatches of their loved one as quickly and cheaply as possible.

LaRita didn't have $1,100. She had $35.

It was all she could spare from the $770 disability check she lives on each month. She called relatives, her brother's friends, even his old jobs, desperate to fill the gap. One of his daughters started a GoFundMe. It wasn't enough.

In the end, LaRita had $208.

"If I was financially able, I would have done it myself, no hassle, even if it was my last penny," she said, sitting beside a grade-school photo of her big brother, looking up at the camera with his father's eyes and an unsure smile.

The disparities that exist in life don't stop when it ends, Dandridge's family learned.

An average funeral cost more than $7,000 as of 2017, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. The price grew at more than twice the rate of other consumer goods during the last two decades, the Bureau of Labor Statistics determined.

The sharp increase occurred as public help in Virginia and the region for what are called indigent burials all but dried up.

Chesterfield County, where Dandridge died, offers no financial help to families who cannot afford a funeral or cremation. Neither does Hanover or Henrico counties.

Had Dandridge lived a few miles north in Richmond, his family could have applied, and likely would have qualified for, up to $500 from the city's Department of Social Services to defray burial expenses.

More than 300 families received assistance through the program over the last three fiscal years, department data show. The city budgets about $50,000 for it annually.

Virginia used to reimburse a portion of the cost to localities for helping families like Dandridge's. The state had set aside $4.6 million for burial assistance as recently as 2008, though the sum dropped to $1 million in the program's final year, 2011.

A spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Social Services said the decision stemmed from budget cuts after the recession. The program has remained unfunded as Virginia's economy has rebounded and its population has swelled.

The state had a $552 million surplus last fiscal year thanks to surging revenues - an amount 120 times the program's 2008 funding level of $4.6 million.

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What happens when you are too poor to afford a funeral or cremation?

Dandridge's family found out: They forfeited their right to his body.

Under Virginia law, a person's relatives have 10 days from the time police originally contact them about a death to claim the body. To do that, they have to make burial or cremation arrangements.

If no one claims the body during that 10-day period, Virginia requires the locality where the person lived to handle the burial or cremation. If it's not clear where they lived, the task falls to the place where they died.

Local law enforcement secures a court order to direct the funeral home that has a contract with the locality to bury or cremate a body. Because the locality pays the cost, almost every person who goes unclaimed in the region is cremated - the cheaper option.

In Richmond, Chesterfield and Henrico, the sheriff's departments have spent thousands annually to handle dozens of unclaimed body cases, according to figures each provided.

In the last three calendar years, the Richmond City Sheriff's Office spent $52,775 to cremate 78 people. The Chesterfield Sheriff's Office spent roughly $30,000 to cremate 30 people during the same period. The Henrico Sheriff's Office spent $90,538 to cremate or bury 60 people in the last three fiscal years.

The costs vary based on the contract each locality has with its funeral home.

Across the region, it's unclear how many of the cases stem from relatives not having the money to cover burial expenses, but Henrico Sheriff Mike Wade said it's likely to occur at least a handful of times.

"Unfortunately, some of the hospitals will tell people: 'You don't have money to bury them, don't claim them.' I don't like that, but I know they've done that," Wade said.

In Chesterfield, about half of the 14 unclaimed body cases last year had family who couldn't afford funeral costs, said Sheriff Karl Leonard.

Dandridge became the county's fourth case this year when he died in early March. Last Monday, Chesterfield served Morrissett Funeral and Cremation Service with a court order to pick up his body from the morgue.

By then, three weeks had passed since Dandridge died, and his relatives didn't know if they would have the chance to say their final goodbyes.

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Dandridge's uncle, Raymond Paige, sums up his family's ordeal with three words:

"Sad. Emotional. Degrading."

At the time of the court order, there was no assurance Dandridge's relatives would have a chance to view his body despite repeated requests Paige said he made to the county. That changed when the funeral home learned about his family, following an inquiry from a Richmond Times-Dispatch reporter.

Morrissett requested and received permission from the county to allow a brief viewing, the first time that had happened with an unclaimed body case, said Larry Corey, Morrissett's comptroller. Preparing the body for a viewing required additional staff time, and by extension, money, but the funeral home did it free of charge, Corey said.

Last Thursday around noon, five of Dandridge's family members - including Paige, his sister, and the younger of **Cookie**'s two daughters, Paula - walked into Morrissett's squat funeral home on Iron Bridge Road.

Before they could see their nephew, brother or father, each had to sign a release swearing they are his relatives. There was other housekeeping to attend to, as well, including information the funeral home needed before it could move ahead with Dandridge's cremation.

Twenty minutes later, Corey led the family to a room with a placard above the door: Parlor of Hope. Inside, Dandridge lay beneath a blanket with his head propped on a pillow. When the door shut, sobs were audible from outside the room.

Fifteen minutes passed, then Corey knocked on the door and let them know it was time to go.

Paige said he was thankful the funeral home allowed his family that time to see Dandridge.

They stood outside afterward, comforting one another and laughing through tears as they swapped stories about his goofy streak and his strawberry shortcake and his knack for reimagining commonplace objects as art.

He turned liquor bottles into lamps and glued together empty packs of the Newport cigarettes he used to smoke to form picture frames. He didn't flaunt his creativity, but it brought those around him great joy, his daughter said. She lights up recalling slippers he would crochet her as a child.

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As they left Thursday, the question of when Dandridge's family would receive his ashes was unanswered.

Under state law, Morrissett is required to hold them for 120 days. Usually, the funeral home places the ashes of an unclaimed body in an underground vault at Centralia cemetery with those of other people it cremated for the county through the years.

The ashes are stored individually, together. If a family member isn't found right away or doesn't initially come forward, they can claim their relative's remains months or years later for the fee of having the vault unearthed and opened: about $500. No one has, Corey said.

In Dandridge's case, Corey said the funeral home is willing to hand his ashes over to his family after the four-month period is up - or sooner, if the county gives its blessing.

Whether either scenario will fly with Chesterfield is unclear. Leonard, the sheriff, said he was worried giving Dandridge's ashes to his family at no cost would result in relatives opting not to claim their loved ones so the county pays to cremate them.

"This could open up Pandora's box," Leonard said.

The night after the viewing, LaRita Dandridge lay in bed, unable to sleep. She thought about what her family had been through over the past four weeks, culminating in the pain she felt when she touched her brother's cold hand that day.

She wouldn't wish it on anyone.

**In Hillside Court, a 16-year-old vegetarian wants to expand health food access**

Vegetables were something of a foreign commodity to Asia Goode growing up in Hillside Court.

"I didn't even know what a Brussels sprout was," Goode said.

Goode's family sometimes ate tomatoes and lettuce, but it wasn't until she was a teenager that she tasted her first Brussels sprouts. Now, the 16-year-old junior at Open High School is a full-blown vegetarian, and she is leading a new effort to expand healthy food access in her neighborhood.

Dead leaves crunched beneath her Nikes in mid-November as she surveyed ground zero for her plans: a partially shaded plot behind Hillside's recreation center on Harwood Street. Goode was laying the groundwork for a community garden on the plot, an initiative that could help improve health outcomes for her neighbors.

The South Richmond public housing community, engulfed by industrial areas, is one of the most isolated neighborhoods in the city. Its 1,055 residents are more than 3 miles from the nearest full-service grocery store that carries produce.

"We get the short end of the stick sometimes," Goode said. "On the South Side, I don't think people invest in areas with low-income housing enough. I don't think that's right. There's people over here who deserve to be looked into and cared about."

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Goode is a standout student at one of the region's most competitive high schools. But what truly distinguishes her, teachers and neighbors say, is her commitment to making a difference in her community.

"That is intrinsic in her," said Barbara Haas, a librarian at Thomas C. Boushall Middle School who has mentored Goode. "Everything she is fighting for, all of her values, all of her passion, that's coming from within her."

Goode's vision for Hillside has roots in her eighth-grade Earth science class at Boushall.

Her teacher, Juliane Codd Toce, taught a lesson on the environmental impact of the meat production industry and explained how it contributed to her personal decision to not eat meat.

Vegetarianism piqued Goode's curiosity. After talking more with Codd Toce, she decided she wanted to make the same commitment, but that posed a few challenges. Fruits and vegetables are difficult to come by at Hillside. Even if she could obtain them, she didn't know how to cook.

Over the summer, Codd Toce invited Goode to her home for a different lesson: how to prepare risotto with spinach, asparagus and artichoke hearts. When the dish passed Goode's taste test, she was hooked. So began Goode's crash course in vegetarianism.

"At our stores, it's a bunch of junk food," Goode said. "I thought, what are all these crazy vegetables? Asparagus? I've never even heard of that. Beets? What's that?'"

Codd Toce introduced Goode to chard, kale and mushrooms. She showed her how to incorporate dried beans into certain dishes so Goode could consume important proteins without relying on soy products. She taught her how to pick out ripe fruits and spot soon-to-be-spoiled produce.

The pair would often visit the grocery store where Goode's family shops, a Food Lion on Jefferson Davis Highway in North Chesterfield. Other times, they would go to stores in wealthier areas, where vegetarian and vegan products abounded.

At the stores in wealthier areas, Goode noticed the size of the produce section and the quality of produce she could buy stood in contrast to the Food Lion where her family shopped. The disparities raised discussions between the two, Codd Toce said.

"Generally, when you go to parts of town that are more poverty-stricken, the grocery stores are further apart, harder to access and the produce section is smaller and there aren't a lot of options," said Codd Toce, who now teaches at Binford Middle. "We talked about how unfair that is and what can we do to change that."

It wasn't until Goode took a class at Art 180, a nonprofit in Jackson Ward, that she learned the term "food desert," which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as a neighborhood where people must travel more than a mile to reach a grocery store. Three-quarters of South Richmond qualifies for the dubious denotation.

To Goode, the term was a revelation. It crystallized the economic forces she was up against as a Hillside resident. She realized how living in one of the deserts had shaped her choices before she began spending time with Codd Toce.

"Even if I was to go to a Food Lion before all that, I would go toward the honey buns, because that's what I knew," she said. "When I took that class, something clicked. I knew that something was wrong."

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Two convenience stores are within walking distance of Hillside Court. It is routine to see people returning from one of them with junk food in hand, Goode said. What limited fruits and vegetables are available at the stores, if any, aren't always fresh.

Shalom Farms operates a mobile produce stand that visits the neighborhood weekly during spring, summer and fall so residents can purchase vegetables. Otherwise, they must trek to a store.

Goode's mother doesn't own a car, so once a month, her older sister, who does, gives them a ride to the Food Lion, 5 miles away, where they stock up for the month. Most of the fresh produce her family buys will last a week, at most. Then, she eats frozen or canned vegetables and other nonperishables to tide her over until they can make another trip.

Goode's family receives Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits, more commonly known as food stamps. Their budget ' about $300 a month ' combined with the lack of access to fresh produce, makes being a vegetarian a challenge, Goode said.

Even without a self-imposed diet, people who live in low-income neighborhoods face obstacles to eating healthfully, said Duron Chavis, community engagement manager for Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and one of the region's foremost advocates for urban agriculture and community gardens.

With choices constrained by time, access and budget, families rely on corner and dollar stores, fast-food restaurants and other processed or frozen meals that are convenient but seldom healthy. Over time, those contribute to higher incidence of such chronic ailments as diabetes and heart disease.

In Richmond, community gardens have offered an entry point to healthy eating in communities where residents have few options.

"Are they helping communities get access to healthy food? Yes. Are they the solution? No," Chavis said. "They're a part of a continuum of decisions that need to be made in order to increase access to healthy food in the city."

Chavis served on a task force convened by former Mayor Dwight C. Jones to study food policy and advise how the city could promote more equitable access aimed at improving health outcomes in neighborhoods like Hillside.

The panel issued a report in 2013 with 17 short- and long-term recommendations. Among those were allowing SNAP recipients to use the benefits at farmers **markets**, emphasizing nutritional education in city schools, and hiring a food policy coordinator to lead efforts.

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Goode is working with Chavis and the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Urban Gardener Program on the community garden at Hillside. The nonprofit will provide seed money for the garden and technical assistance to get it up and running in the spring.

She wants her elderly neighbors to have produce available without taking a tiresome trip to the store, and her younger ones to try something new straight from the vine. She wants the tomatoes and lettuce and potatoes and peppers they plant together to flourish. This time next year, she wants to look back on a growing season that brought a bounty to her community borne out of her ambition.

Patrice Shelton, Hillside's tenant council president, said she believes the garden will benefit everyone in the neighborhood. She is proud the project sprung up from within Hillside.

"Everyone thinks that outside folks know better what's needed in the community," said Shelton, also a certified community health worker for the Richmond City Health District. "For [Goode] to step up as a youth and take the initiative is great to see."

In 2021, Goode will graduate from Open High. She is interested in studying agriculture and sustainability, but hasn't decided where she will apply to college.

For the moment, she is focused on the plot behind the recreation center. Nearby, a mural depicts a towering tree alongside the words: "Strong roots run deep in Hillside Court."

More are on the way.