

North Worcester County Plan to End Homelessness

October 2008

Background

Worcester County covers the entire area of Central Massachusetts. Historically, persons have referred to three sections: Greater Worcester, South County and North County. Due to Greater Worcester being a major metropolitan area, many of the services required by homeless persons have been located there. North Worcester County does not have the shelter system that the City of Worcester possesses and unlike the tension that exists between city and providers in Worcester, its few shelter providers have had very good relationships with the community and neighborhoods. Agencies in North County work collaboratively with each other as well as with the communities that they serve as indicated by the following partnerships/coalitions:

- **North Central Neighborworks Homeownership Center:** In an attempt to coordinate services of the major housing agencies in the region, the North Central Neighborworks Homeownership Center was developed. The NCNHC is a one stop resource for homeownership information, education and counseling for current and potential homeowners. This model is the result of a collaboration born out of the CRA Coalition and some of its members including Twin Cities CDC, Montachusett Opportunity Council, RCAP Solutions, Montachusett Regional Planning Commission and the Greater Gardner CDC.
- **Joint Coalition on Health of North Central Massachusetts** is a group of committed individuals and organizations working collaboratively as catalysts for change and advocates for the underserved to improve the health and well-being of everyone in North Central Massachusetts. Together these organizations have participated in and developed multiple large scale and long term initiatives aimed at increasing access to care.
- **The North Central MA Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) Coalition** is a unique local partnership between financial institutions, municipalities and community-based organizations which works together to address the credit, housing, economic development and banking needs of the entire community including minority and low- to moderate-income residents and neighborhoods.

In line with that collaborative nature, the **North Central Mass Housing Coalition** is a network of providers, housing authorities, city planners, transportation authorities, and landlord associations that meet regularly. It has served as a means of disseminating information of up coming projects by developers or programs, information regarding changing needs in the community, and brings resources to our area. This network is capable of expanding to meet the need of the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH) RFR in coordinating, improving, and implementing new strategies to end homelessness.

Goal 1. Expand "Housing First" with adequate resources.

"Housing First" is the name given to a strategy for housing the homeless that promotes rapid re-housing for homeless individuals and families. The implication in the name is that housing should come first, followed by necessary services to stabilize the family or individual in their permanent housing environment.

Housing First also refers to the strategy of avoiding homeless shelters entirely. Rapid housing placement immediately upon becoming homeless, or when homelessness is imminent, is preferable to shelter placement because it avoids an unnecessary step in the process.

The model promotes a combination of affordable housing with outreach-based or home based services. Housing can be in apartments or Single Room Occupancy Units, and the housing units can be scattered-site (dispersed widely throughout the community), congregate (shared living space among families or individuals), or clustered (separate units located near each other), dependent upon program model and funding level for services. The cost of housing is subsidized with federal, state or private funds, and program participants usually pay about 30% of their income as rent.

The service model is typically "low threshold", meaning that families and individuals do not need to accept services, or need to agree to only the most basic contact with service staff. It is important that sufficient services be available for implementation of the model in the area, and that services can be accessed at least on an emergency basis 24-hours/day for those programs targeting the chronically homeless.

Although the Housing First model is relatively new, research across the country in early and pilot implementations have demonstrated that model programs improve the housing stability, health and quality of life of participants; and, that total costs are actually reduced. Cost savings have been demonstrated for programs that target chronically homeless persons through reductions in the utilization of hospitals, shelters, emergency medical and psychiatric services, substance abuse detoxification services, and prison stays (Culhane, Metreaux, and Hadley, 2002; Martinez and Burt, 2006; Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, 2007). Other studies showed that active substance abusers can be stably housed (Padgett, Gulcur, and Tsemberis, 2006), and that shelter use is reduced (Metreaux, Culhane and Hadley, 2003).

Here, in North Worcester County, our service providers have been using the Housing First approach long before it became fashionable. There is only one emergency shelter in North Worcester County that has been operating since 1985. That shelter is for homeless individuals. Residents stay until they locate permanent housing and the average length of stay is approximately two months. There are no "permanent" residents at the Emergency Shelter as can be found in the larger metropolitan shelters.

The only family shelter was located in Leominster and closed several years ago. Since then, families who are homeless in North Worcester County had to travel to Worcester to find temporary emergency or transitional shelter. In order to allow families from North County to stay in the area, the Montachusett Opportunity Council applied for and received rental vouchers

through McKinney funds to place families into housing. To date they have 20 units of family housing with supportive services emphasizing self sufficiency.

In September of 2006, Our Father's House and MOC collaborated to assume the management of a family shelter program located at Devens, MA. This program has 16 units of housing with supportive services attached.

There are two other "emergency shelter" programs located in North County – The Valiton Shelter, located on Fairmont Street, Fitchburg and the Montachusett Interfaith Hospitality Network, located on Summer Street, in Fitchburg. The Valiton provides shelter to substance abuse users and the MIHN provides short term assistance to homeless families through volunteer efforts.

In 2006, an innovative collaborative opened a Housing First model located on Myrtle Ave, Fitchburg. HUD resources are subsidizing the rents through the McKinney funding. Community Health Link manages the vouchers; Gardner Visiting Nurses Association provides the case management supportive services; Our Father's House provides the screening and referral from the emergency shelter; the Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council owns the building; and the Montachusett Opportunity Council oversees the coordination of the collaborative. This program has helped meet the need in the area for permanent housing of the chronically homeless.

We recommend that new federal, state, city, and private resources targeted for North Worcester County should be utilized to implement Housing First programs with no restrictions with regard to chronic, non-chronic, or disabled. Existing programs, where feasible, should be converted to Housing First to increase the cost effectiveness of existing resources.

Objective 1.1 Increase Affordable Housing and Develop New Permanent Supportive Housing for the Homeless Using the Housing First Model

Homelessness is attributable first and foremost to a shortage of affordable housing. For both families and individuals there are a myriad of precipitating events to homelessness, but the ability to pay for housing is most often decisive. Increasing the supply of affordable rental housing is, therefore, critical to any plan to end homelessness.

For homeless individuals and families where disabilities or the lack of appropriate skills and supports are impediments to stable housing, we must provide affordable supportive housing where services can be provided for as long as necessary to reasonably ensure that housing will be stable.

Objective 1.2 Eliminate Homeless Shelters within Five Years

The recommendation from the Governor's Task Force to End Homelessness is that shelters be phased out over the next five years, and as they are phased out, they would be replaced with Assessment and Triage Centers where newly homeless or at-risk families and individuals are

rapidly assessed, given extended assessment and brief respite if necessary, and then immediately placed into housing using the Housing First model. This model eliminates shelters, but also retains the safety net for the homeless.

We are aware that the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) is currently planning to implement pilot Housing First programs for homeless families. It is the intent of the North Worcester County communities and key area service providers work with DTA to implement this model as soon as practicable.

Objective 1.3 Convert Emergency Shelter

Our Father's House is committed to converting the emergency shelter on Lunenburg Street into transitional or permanent housing as soon as the need for emergency shelter allows it.

Data suggests that over the past three years the demand for emergency shelter has decreased largely due to the creation of a Housing First model for chronic homeless on Myrtle Ave. In Fiscal Year 06, OFH turned away 1144 persons – FY 07 OFH turned away 912 persons – while in FY 08 the shelter turned away 228 persons. The Governor's report on homelessness recommends that every state agency take ownership of their role in homelessness. Forty percent of the residents at the Emergency Shelter have come from detoxification centers. Another forty percent have mental health issues and approximately ten percent have come from the Department of Corrections. If those state agencies implemented discharge policies prohibiting discharge to Emergency Shelters, then the need for Emergency Shelter would significantly be reduced.

We believe that if there was a continuous supply of shallow rent subsidies for individuals in the North County area, they could be placed immediately into housing and when appropriate, have supportive services attached. Since North County has a smaller population of individuals who meet the definition of chronic homeless, and those individuals are being housed through the Myrtle Ave project, any new resources should be used to reduce the numbers of persons staying at the Emergency Shelter on Lunenburg Street. This may require that there be no restrictions on rent subsidies.

Objective 1.4 Develop Assessment and Triage Services for Families

Assessment and Triage Services should be developed for newly homeless families. The Service(s) for families should be converted from existing shelter programs with existing DTA funding and have the capacity to house families that need an extended period of assessment prior to their direct placement into housing.

The Transitions at Devens program is based upon a rapid rehousing approach and is committed to the philosophy. The program could easily convert to the Assessment & Triage Center if appropriate.

Objective 1.5 Develop an Assessment and Triage Service for Homeless Individuals that includes Aggressive Outreach and Case Management

We recommend the development of a new Assessment and Triage Service for Homeless Individuals that includes 12 beds for extended assessment or respite. A portion of the Emergency Shelter on Lunenburg Street could be used for this purpose. The assessment function would include screening for eligibility in other service systems and insurance coverage to facilitate appropriate referrals. The service should also include an Aggressive Outreach component that can identify and bring street homeless into the service system.

Due to the lack of chronic homeless in North County, case management services should be available for all homeless and ensure that this staff has admitting authority for all system housing and service programs designed to serve homeless individuals including those programs serving the chronic homeless. This would also ameliorate current system problems by facilitating admissions into housing programs for the chronically homeless.

Goal 2. Expand Homeless Prevention and Diversion Resources

There is great potential cost savings in preventing families and individuals from becoming homeless when they are imminently at-risk. The purpose of a diversion system is to keep vulnerable families safe and housed. An effective diversion system involves the entire community including landlords, neighborhood organizations, schools, human service providers, health providers and others. We believe, therefore, that prevention and diversion are the most cost-effective strategies to address homelessness. This is particularly true for families where economic problems are most always paramount in precipitating homelessness. Spending small amounts of money to retain families or individuals in housing has been demonstrated to be an effective tactic in preventing homelessness (CMHA, 2007). The ICHH has identified a multi-pronged approach for families at risk of homelessness including an early warning system, shelter diversion for families at risk of homelessness within a short time period and income and asset maximization.

We have identified seven elements that should be included in an effective prevention and diversion strategy: an early warning system, a triage and assessment system, the capacity to leverage resources to preserve tenancies, court advocacy if necessary, reduction of barriers to secure housing, comprehensive stabilization services, and maximization of affordable housing resources through collaboration.

Objective 2.1 Increase Availability of Flexible Funds and Case Management Services to Prevent Homelessness

The availability of concrete resources is crucial to forestalling housing loss. Emergency help with food and other necessities, crisis mental health services and legal assistance may all be needed within a short timeframe. Flexible funds for such expenses as utility and rent arrearages can prevent homelessness for those imminently at-risk. After the immediate crisis is resolved, diversion focuses on chronic issues which threaten housing stability. These may include low income, dependence on public benefits, limited education, and training, mental health issues,

substance abuse or disability issues. The focus of long-term work is on reducing the level of risk by building self-sufficiency and developing assets. Providing this level of service will require additional case management resources.

Objective 2.2 Increase Educational Efforts and Develop an Early Warning System to Target Persons At-risk of Homelessness.

Educational efforts with area landlords can preserve tenancies through mediation and intervention services in conjunction with the Housing Court. Educational efforts with first responders such as schools, health care providers, neighborhood centers, and food pantries can encourage appropriate prevention referrals.

We would recommend developing a strong network of school contacts, health care providers, neighborhood centers, food pantries and local church/religious institutions who could alert the Assessment and Triage Team when families or individuals are on the verge of becoming homeless rather than wait until housing is lost.

Goal 3. Improve Service Strategies

The housing and service system for homeless families and individuals can become much more effective with improved service strategies.

An Assessment and Triage System would expedite the delivery of services and ensure that families or individuals who are homeless or about to become homeless do not have to maneuver through a maze of services. This would allow the North County Network to deliver the right services to the right people at the right time.

Objective 3.1 Strengthen Skills and Supports for the Homeless

Homeless families and individuals frequently have marginal skills and inadequate supports to help them prevent or extricate themselves from homelessness. Service providers can help the homeless build skills in basic living areas such as vocational training, budgeting, parenting, household management, hygiene, and nutrition. Similarly, we can offer supports to assist them in becoming stable in housing with job placement, child-care, after-school programs, transportation, and connection to other needed community services.

Goal 4 Improve Oversight and Accountability of the Housing and Service System

Federal McKinney programs for the homeless are required to be monitored by grantees. For state- and city-funded programs, performance monitoring is the responsibility of the funding entities, but results of these efforts are rarely communicated beyond the vendor agency involved.

Objective 4.1 Develop a North County Commission on Homelessness to improve delivery of services and accountability of the Housing and Services System.

A North County Commission on Homelessness should be created to recommend policy regarding the problem of homelessness. Its responsibilities should include:

- Implementing, monitoring, and updating this plan as necessary
- Conducting periodic reviews of the needs of homeless individuals and families
- Recommending municipal budgetary expenditures to end homelessness
- Advocating for the needs of the homeless

Goal 5. Ensure that Programs are sited responsibly

The Task Force encourages nonprofits that intend to site programs to employ what are generally considered best practices that include notification of appropriate officials and neighbors, responding to questions and concerns.

Business and Education Communities

The business and education communities have important roles in supporting the goals and objectives set forth in this plan to end homelessness. Creating opportunities for decent paying jobs and participating in developing a well trained workforce will help to ensure housing stability for individuals and families in our community.