

Decade to Doorways: The Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness in Chester County

Version 1.0

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Chapter 1: Background

“It was your efforts that proved to us over the last decade that, given the right resources, tools, and partnerships, we can house anyone. Our job now is to house everyone.”
–U.S. Housing & Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Shaun Donovan

Introduction

On any given night, 649,917 persons experience homelessness in the U.S. (AHAR, 2010). This number seems daunting, but homelessness cannot be entirely explained by statistics. Everyone who is part of this number has a story. These stories are real and show how homelessness affects every aspect of our community.

Homelessness touches the intact family where a parent lost a job and cannot afford housing. It may be the face of a child who is just entering middle school, whose parents lost their home over the summer and is now staying in a shelter. It appears in the life of a recent college graduate who cannot find a job leading to self-sufficiency. Another victim of homelessness could be a mother with a stable job but who had to flee her housing because of domestic violence. Affected too, is the Veteran, who served our country for many years but returned home to find that it was difficult to re-enter society.

The causes and situations of homelessness are vast and often deep-rooted. However, it is vital to recognize that homelessness does not define anyone. It is a temporary situation to which an end is achievable.

In a country as rich in resources and accomplishments as America—why does homelessness still exist? And even more important: How can we all work together to prevent and end homelessness? Chester County is committed to answering this question through targeting homeless individuals and collaborating with key stakeholders. Developed by the community, the following plan has the goal of preventing and ending homelessness in Chester County within the next 10 years.

Where We’ve Come from as a Nation & Best Practices to Move Us Forward

How we address the past forms the foundation of our future. One of the laws addressing homelessness is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This Act was signed into law in 1987, and was the first significant piece of legislation to address homelessness. It spawned fifteen federal programs and established the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which is a collaborative of nineteen federal agencies all focused on the issue of homelessness. In the early 2000’s, the USICH began promoting the design of 10-Year Strategic Plans to Prevent and End Homelessness.

After 24 years of hard work and dedication, homelessness is still an issue in the United States, including Chester County. In fact, approximately 1,100 experience homelessness in Chester County every year, and this number is growing (Emergency Shelter Statistics, 2010). During the past 24 years, a lot has been learned about homelessness in terms of demographics, and

successful and unsuccessful methods for addressing homelessness.

Common Misconception

Initially, it was believed that people needed to go through a multi-step approach to resolve their situation by entering the shelter system, moving to transitional housing, and eventually moving into permanent housing. This process often takes years and is focused on “housing-readiness.” However, it is now understood that most people do not follow this path to exit homelessness. In fact, research shows that people will often return to the homeless system even after completing a multi-step approach.

Housing First

Housing First, also known as rapid re-housing, is a relatively recent concept in human service programs and social policy . It is seen as an alternative to the traditional multi-step emergency shelter and transitional housing approach. The Housing First method places people in stable housing as soon as possible; and it is based on the belief that when individuals have housing, they have several strong motivations to keep it. Once in housing, the approach focuses on connecting the tenants with services and supports that address their individual needs.

Instead of providing a uniform approach to service delivery, the “housing first” philosophy promotes personalized empowerment and, ultimately, sustainability. This serves to highlight peoples’ strengths and accompanies them through the often-cumbersome process of obtaining permanent housing. This approach also allows them to become the solution to their own problems. As a community network working toward ending homelessness, prevention and early provision of permanent housing are the greatest tools.

Prevention

Another important best practice is to adopt cost-effective strategies dedicated to reducing the financial impact of homelessness. In terms of this impact, it costs approximately \$2,244 per person to house someone in a shelter during a typical length of stay in Chester County (Profile on Homelessness, 2010). For a family of 5, it could easily cost the system over \$12,000 per shelter stay (approximately 60 days). In other words, this amount could literally pay for a family’s housing for over 12 months in regular rental housing with a graduated subsidy that reduces as their income increases.

For example, a housing crisis could occur due to a landlord-tenant conflict. The landlord may evict the tenant within two weeks. Currently, the tenant would probably end up in an emergency shelter. Instead of bringing someone into the system, the concept of prevention would promote providing the supports needed to maintain housing. If this option did not work, another possibility would be to move the family to more affordable housing with small amounts of financial assistance, such as utilities or rent assistance coupled with intensive supports. Sometimes, the situation may also entail minimal services, such as providing landlord-tenant mediation. With individualized support services based on their needs, they could become housed as quickly as they increase income through employment or benefits and develop a budgeting plan. With adequate timing and focus, prevention is a proactive, cost-effective approach to alleviating homelessness and is another fundamental component of the community’s 10 Year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.

Moving Forward

The focus in the past has been on the management of homelessness. Since 2000, Chester County has invested over \$14 million into homeless programs (Profile on Homelessness, 2010). Although many lives have been changed, the fact remains that homelessness is still a persistent issue. While the system may help a person at a given moment, currently it employs a reactive, transactional approach. This is opposed to an approach that is fundamentally proactive and innovative. With the collective knowledge and shared commitment, making an impact on this issue is not only possible but imminent. This must involve re-framing the mindset and way of doing business. In the future, common notions of housing, individual and family strengths, prevention, housing first, holistic services, and creative solutions need to be adopted.

The future must also entail ending the cycle of homelessness through strategic planning. This represents the foundation of the plan; indeed homelessness has to be prevented before it occurs.

Creating the Plan

Over 200 community members across the county have participated in the creation and development of “Decade to Doorways.” These stakeholders represent consumers, non-profit organizations, government employees, healthcare practitioners, educators, faith-based organizations, businesses, and people from the general public. Through a series of workshops and committee meetings, our plan marks the culmination of an almost two year process

Phase 1: Gathering the Data

In November 2010, the *Profile on Homelessness* was launched. This profile provides a snapshot of homelessness in Chester County and the underlying roots of the issue. In order to address homelessness, a strong understanding is necessary of what the problems look like in Chester County. Therefore, the profile served as the precursor to the Community’s 10 Year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. This information is a point of reference to understand the current situation, the system, and future opportunities and challenges that are faced in preventing and ending homelessness. In addition, the Annual Point in Time Count and Consumer Surveys among our shelter population, were both conducted in January 2011.

Phase 2: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

On February 2 2011, the Chester County Department of Community Development conducted a S.W.O.T. Analysis. This analysis took place over a several-hour period and consisted of pinpointing the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of the homelessness service-providing network in Chester County. Over 100 persons participated. This successful session is what underpinned the current “inventory” of the county’s homelessness services and provided us with a much better picture of successful components and needed improvements. The S.W.O.T. Analysis also received valuable feedback from a wide range of organizations and representatives from the community that informed our planning process moving forward.

Phase 3: Development of Strategies & Goals

In March 2011, 4 Strategic Planning Sessions were held across the county in Chester Springs, Coatesville, Kennett Square, and West Chester. Like the S.W.O.T. Analysis, these sessions were open to participants from a wide range of service providing non-profit and government agencies. These sessions were held in different locations of the county to maximize accessibility to interested participants. The information that was derived from the strategic planning sessions aided in coming up with relatively defined strategies inspired by common emerging themes.

Phase 4: Development of the Plan

After refining the strategies, the next step was to reach out to service providers throughout the county, as well as the executive directors and board members of those agencies. On May 24, 2011 a Homeless Systems Dialogue was organized with the purpose to solicit input from a direct service perspective, as well as receive feedback on the implication of pending changes from the agencies' operations perspective. This session was particularly important to increasing the sustainability of the 10-Year Plan.

On June 29, 2011 Goals and Action Items for the plan were developed. This marked the final formalized outreach session to community stakeholders. With specific strategies developed, participants were tasked with developing associated goals and action items.

Overall, the community outreach process was essential to develop the content of the plan, and it helped lay the foundation of solid working relationships. These relationships are particularly important to the implementation of the 10-Year Plan and accomplishing its overall mission. The outreach process was important to developing a common understanding as to why new approaches are being employed.

Mission of the Community's 10 Year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness:

Maximize current resources and develop new ones, making them as efficient and useful as possible with the end goal of reducing, preventing and ending homelessness in Chester County.

Guiding Principles

After research, five guiding principles were developed. These values will direct how each strategy in "Decade to Doorways" will help to successfully achieve the goals.

1. Shift focus from managing homelessness to ending it
2. Use national and community best practices and evidenced-based solutions including prevention and housing first
3. Make data-driven decisions
4. Focus on a client-centered approach that encourages individual empowerment and service coordination
5. Shift funding priorities to align with community plan

Chapter 2: Strategies

STRATEGY 1: BUILD THE FOUNDATION

Partner together to implement the plan, and increase communication and collaboration of all stakeholders and the public

It is common to not have a complete understanding of homelessness, even when working within the care system. For those without a direct relationship with the homeless system understanding these many complexities can seem impossible. In Chester County, with a population of almost 500,000 and less than 1% of the population whom is experiencing homelessness at a given point in time, awareness of the issue itself is limited. However, this percentage does not include people who live in “doubled-up” housing or on the verge of homelessness. Along with stigmatization, stereotypes, and complexities of the care system, community engagement is minimal and there are limited partnerships focused on ending homelessness. Services focused on homelessness have often developed in silos, independent, and unaware of other programs in the county. Raising awareness and collaborative engagement of both the public and the service providers is vital to ending homelessness in the next 10 years. The purpose of this strategy is to provide a solid knowledge and relationship base from which the rest of the strategies can be implemented.

Goal 1: Increase community awareness and education around homelessness

Goal 2: Capitalize on existing partnerships

Goal 3: Build new partnerships

Goal 4: Develop and execute an implementation plan

Goal 5: Advocate for the needs of the plan

Benchmarks:

First Year:

- Develop an implementation plan and host a county-wide implementation meeting
- Institute the Community Services Planning Committee as oversight committee
- Develop a logo for the plan
- Host a kick-off event
- Engage print and online press in events
- Gather all homeless service providers to discuss the plan
- Develop an email list and distribute a e-newsletter
- Develop a central website with easy access to all related resources and information
- Develop a consumer board

Year 2 through 5:

- Provide representation at area fairs, community health events, senior fairs, etc.
- Work with the school districts to provide homelessness awareness education
- Develop an educational presentation/tool, which includes consumer stories
- Make presentations to no less than 25 organizations, such as Rotary, Lions Clubs, Department of Public Welfare, Businesses, the Chester County Economic Development Council, the Chester County Chamber of Business, schools etc.
- Survey and measure Chester County's awareness of homelessness, and identify groups and subjects of low awareness
- Create a plan of engagement for those groups and subjects
- Recruit volunteers to assist with educational efforts
- Make the annual event into a fundraiser
- Engage businesses, using the existing workforce system (e.g. CareerLink), and organizations, partner with existing community organizations such as libraries, schools and stores.
- Establish a mentoring program
- Develop an advocacy group

After 5 years:

- Continue to involve the community through presentations, engagement, and other means of communication.
- Reach a 90% community awareness saturation
- Plan and host a 10 year County-wide celebration

STRATEGY 2: PREVENTION

Prevent people from experiencing homelessness by helping them to maintain housing

Contrary to popular belief, the most common length of time that someone experiences homelessness is one to two days, and half the people who enter the shelter system will leave within 30 days and never return. In light of this, prevention from entering into homelessness has been shown to have the least effect on families, and is the most cost effective approach for communities to cope with homelessness. The fundamental focus of prevention is to maintain their current housing, or find more suitable housing. An effective prevention system will assist people at-risk for homelessness by avoiding the loss of quality housing. This process entails a comprehensive process of triage and diverts persons before they enter the homeless system.

Goal 1: Design a prevention system

Goal 2: Provide a centralized access point to services

Goal 3: Provide flexible and long-term financial assistance

Goal 4: End discharges from institutions into homelessness

Benchmarks:

First Year:

- Create a team tasked with designing and overseeing the prevention program
- Develop a homelessness prevention model that couples financial assistance with the services necessary to maintain housing
- Focus on identification, targeting and outreach of people and families at-risk for homelessness

Year 2 through 5:

- Develop a system that provides easy access to prevention resources and services
- Implement a coordinated financial assistance system focused on keeping people housed
- Provide ongoing training and educational opportunities to service providers in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the prevention system
- Modify policies to promote more effective administration of public and private funds focused on prevention
- Coordinate resources to streamline prevention efforts and provide longer-term financial assistance
- Examine the institutional policies compared to the operational policies that lead to the discharge of people onto the streets
- Prioritize funding for programs that have a proven track record in prevention

After 5 Years:

- Reduce the amount of people who enter the shelter system
- Maintain coordinated access to the prevention and financial assistance system

STRATEGY 3: HOUSING OPTIONS

Promote more affordable and accessible general occupancy housing options

Housing First, also known as "rapid re-housing", is a relatively recent innovation in human service programs and social policy . It is seen as an alternative to the traditional, multi-step emergency shelter and transitional housing approach. The Housing First method places people in stable housing as soon as possible. Once in housing the approach focuses on connecting the tenants with services and supports that address their individual needs. According to HUD (The Washington Post, July 10, 2010) Housing First programs have helped reduce the number of chronically homeless nationwide by a third since 2005.

Within a Housing First Model, the availability of affordable and accessible housing is the foundation to preventing and ending homelessness. The lack of affordable housing in Chester County has been researched and mentioned extensively in the last decades. The Chester County Profile on Homelessness, released in November 2010, demonstrates the high cost of housing and the burden it places on a significant number of residents.

According to city-data.com the median contract rental price in Chester County in 2009 was \$921, while for the State of Pennsylvania in general it was \$597. Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data shows that in 2009 almost 75% of Chester County residents with incomes at or below 50% of AMI faced a cost-burden or severe cost-burden maintaining housing. A cost-burden is defined as paying more than 30% of your monthly income on rent and utilities.

Funding that is available for the administration of the 10-Year Plan must prioritize the creation of affordable and permanent housing. However, funding streams dedicated to developing more housing units are limited. Therefore, new creative approaches, such as home-sharing and landlord incentives will have to be explored.

Goal 1: Develop more affordable and permanent housing options

Goal 2: Connect people to housing

Benchmarks:

First Year:

- Explore programs open to the community to increase the county's affordable and permanent housing unit stock
- Develop a task force that focuses on accessibility and landlord outreach
- Develop full utilization of PAhousingsearch.com (by reaching out to both landlords and service providers)
- Educate homeless services providers on the Housing First Model

Year 2 through 5:

- Develop new and/or expand on existing programs that creatively address creation of affordable housing options
- Allow the community to contribute to affordable housing creation
- Facilitate, where appropriate, the conversion of time-limited transitional housing units into permanent housing
- Create more permanent housing options
- Shift the focus of emergency shelters and transitional housing providers to the Housing First Model.
- Integrate a model of shared housing
- Provide incentives to landlords
- Research the possibilities to provide incentives to developers to set aside a portion of housing units to affordable housing, making connections with county's "Landscapes 2" growth management plan.

After 5 years:

- Prioritize funding to build as many affordable housing units for (at risk) homeless individuals and families as possible
- Continue existing programs and create new ones focused on the creation of affordable housing

STRATEGY 4: STAY HOUSED

Provide effective support to obtain and maintain housing

Once housed, people who experienced homelessness often need supports to maintain their housing. Their needs can consist of things such as employment, physical ability, mental health, limited social networks, culture, age, and sexual orientation to name a few. Therefore, they require specialized assistance focused on troubleshooting the barriers to maintaining housing and viewing their strengths. When capitalizing on strengths instead of focusing on weaknesses people can be empowered to sustain their housing. Supportive services are the prevention to recidivism.

Goal 1: Move from crisis response to a proactive system focusing on housing stability

Goal 2: Increase income and employment opportunities for individuals with employment barriers and difficulties

Benchmarks:

First Year:

- Assess current services
- Promote better access to benefits and mainstream resources, like Social Security , food stamps, Medicaid, LIHEAP and TANF
- Work to shift the focus of emergency shelters to prioritize connecting clients to permanent housing
- Focus on specialized individual needs
- Develop a diverse needs special population task force
- ACE Committee
- Maximize CareerLink services and efficiency

Year Two through Five:

- Identify gaps in the current services, and develop linkages and customize programs to meet individual needs
- Continue to shift the focus of emergency shelters to prioritize connecting clients to permanent housing
- Emphasize more integration of mental health, and drug and alcohol services
- Develop a mobile case management model
- Identify and/or develop a program to remove barriers to employment such as obtaining birth certificates, identification, having a mailing address, clothing etc.
- Increase employer awareness and outreach, look to mechanisms for increasing On the Job Training (OJT) funds and target specific employment barriers, such as criminal history
- Increase entrepreneurship opportunities
- Link Financial/Budgeting Training, Life Skill Training

After Five Years:

- Continue to focus on providing supportive services needed to keep people housed

STRATEGY 5: DATA

Coordinate data collection and analysis to provide information that is accurate, meaningful, and can be utilized to prevent and end homelessness

To measure the success of the Ten Year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness the collection and analysis of data, and the development of performance measurements, is crucial. Data can influence decision making, prove the effectiveness of the plan, and provide the public with information on ending homelessness. Accurate information on the status and changes in the homeless population will allow for informed adjustments to the plan throughout the years, keeping it relevant and efficient.

Currently, Chester County has a limited homeless data tracking system in place, but ideally data should be coordinated across all services regardless of whether they fall within the homeless system. Coordinating data between other county departments, police, emergency rooms, neighboring counties, and homeless service providers will result in better care, and cost savings to the community.

Goal 1: Engage all homeless service providers and other service providers to participate in a collective data system

Goal 2: Track system outcomes with quality data and associated evaluation measures

Goal 3: Expand the use of the data system

Benchmarks:

First Year:

- Define and establish baseline data
- Review and analyze the current and new performance measurements
- Provide training and technical assistance to obtain quality data
- Ensure the current data tracking system allows for reporting on the performance measurements

Year 2 through 5:

- Educate and assimilate non-government funded entities
- Provide more in depth statistical analysis and reports
- Explore alternative methods for data research and analysis
- Survey and measure user experience
- Develop a plan to enhance user experience
- Add features to the data system
- Explore the idea of data warehousing regionally

After 5 years:

- Further assimilate non-government funded entities and other agencies that serve the homeless population

- Continue to assess data needs, explore alternative data needs and survey user needs
- Focus on reporting and analysis

Chapter 3: Next Steps

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”-Confucius

In the previous chapter, the 5 essential strategies were described. They included:

- Building a Foundation
- Prevention
- Housing
- Staying Housed
- Data

These strategies along with the guiding principles and the commitment to housing first and prevention provide the vision of this plan. The community’s 10 Year Plan “A Decade to Doorways” represents the first time that homelessness is addressed from a strategic, community-wide perspective, and this plan is the roadmap for reaching the goal of ending and preventing homelessness in the next ten years.

Writing the plan is a community achievement that should bring pride. At the same time, the development of the plan is just the beginning.

Implementation Plan

Arriving at the goal of ending homelessness in Chester County calls for an intentional and guided transformation of our current homeless care system. Because of this reason, it is crucial to develop an implementation plan and team to work in conjunction with the 10 Year Plan. The implementation plan is a practical tool that explains how to carry out the strategies and goals outlined in the 10 Year Plan. The implementation plan will also contain clear expectations, describe roles and responsibilities, define tasks, time-frames, and resources including people, technology, equipment, supplies, and funding. Additionally, it will guide how and when stakeholders communicate and how frequently communication will occur and for what reasons. It provides for evaluation and a method to future adjustments. Ultimately, it will keep the community accountable and responsible for the specific steps and goals.

The Shift

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”-Mahatma Gandhi

This plan calls for a community-wide shift, a SYSTEM CHANGE.

We must change the way we do business.

We must be solution-focused. What we have done in the past is not an indicator for what we need to do in the future.

We must shift our focus from managing crises to achieving and maintaining housing stability through prevention and ‘Housing First’.

We must focus on the preservation and the increase of affordable housing, not on the expansion of the shelter and transitional housing system.

We must advocate to change policies, and adapt our practices to fit these policies.

We must build on community and national best practices, align our system with these models, and then redirect resources to housing and services that encompass these ways of thinking.

We must believe that everyone deserves housing, and what housing looks like to them is their choice.

We must be focused on our goal, which is to prevent and end homelessness in our community.

We must use this plan as our guide.

We have a wealth of knowledge, capacity, resources, compassion, and the will necessary to end homelessness in the next 10 years.