

The Future of Homeless Services in a Changing World

November 2011

Published in FORsooth, a publication of the Louisville Chapter of Fellowship of Reconciliation

The Coalition for the Homeless was created in 1984 when citizens and officials of the City of Louisville and Jefferson County sought a coordinated community response to the growing issue of homelessness. The Coalition for the Homeless creates collaborative approaches to ending homelessness and conducts advocacy and educational programs in support of those efforts. The Coalition has now been the voice of homelessness in Louisville for a quarter of a century. And yet, the numbers of homeless people continue to rise. Today, the population of our community's homeless has reached over 9,000 in a single year or 1,515 people on any given day.

The great benefit of the collaborative work of our member agencies over the past two and a half decades is that services for individuals and families who lose their homes are better than ever. In the early 80s, Louisville homeless services were operated mostly by volunteers and included short-term housing, food and clothing assistance and a listening ear. Today, we have state of the art emergency and transitional housing programs with professional staff that address job training, chemical dependency, domestic violence and the myriad of social issues that continue to grow with the increasing pace of our society and the decreasing strength of our economy. In a single year, the Metro Louisville homeless service system helps over 5,000 households move from homelessness to stable, long-term housing. So why do our numbers remain so high?

One reason for persistent homelessness in our community is the economy, but these numbers are not new to the economic downturn. What a growing number of homeless advocates now understand is that while we have learned to help change the lives of homeless individuals and families, we have not figured out how to address the causes that continue to bring new households to the breaking point that results in homelessness.

The basic cause of homelessness is poverty. Yes, homeless individuals and families have increasing chemical dependency, family violence, and mental health issues; but these same issues are prevalent in wealthy families. The difference is the lack of resources to address (or cover up) these issues without losing your residence. As our economy continues to increasingly divide the wealthy from the poor with a larger gulf in salaries and housing costs; the numbers of homeless persons will continue to rise. The fastest growing segment of the homeless are single women with children and young adults, many who are exiting foster care or unstable households with less and less resources due to budgetary cuts from federal and state programs. It is no surprise that these are also the poorest segments of our population. Meanwhile, our service system is overwhelmed with an increasing number of people in need. Therefore, we have created programs that work for individuals and families that apply for services and are compliant in the programs we have designed. This means that the most difficult to serve, the most likely to die on our streets and the most costly to our community continue to live for long periods on our city streets and river banks.

While we cannot change the economy or widening income gaps, The Coalition for the Homeless and a strong group of community partners including Family Health Centers of Louisville, Seven Counties Services and the Louisville Metropolitan Housing Authority, are working to bring a national model created by Common Ground to Louisville, Kentucky. This program locally called Rx: Housing – 100K Homes Louisville is a first step in addressing the lack of services for chronically homeless persons who remain on the streets for many years, even decades. Over 100 local volunteers will canvas the homeless camps throughout the county to identify and assess their needs. We will then be able to provide permanent housing with services for those persons identified whose health factors make them the most likely to die on our streets. Family Health Centers and their program partners, St. John Center and St. Vincent de Paul have already proven that this population, while unsuccessful in transitional housing programs, have over a 90 percent success rate in a model called "Housing

First,” in which homeless persons move directly from the streets to permanent housing with intensive case management. Rx: Housing will, therefore, use this model to house at least 50 of those identified in our community with the greatest needs.

Meanwhile, we are working with another group of partners that include Metropolitan Housing Coalition, Network Center for Community Change, Jefferson County Public Schools, Jefferson County Department of Community Based Services (DCBS) and Jefferson County Courts to address the rising number of homeless youth in our community. A study produced by Metropolitan Housing Coalition shows that these youth, representing 10 percent of the public school system population, have higher instances of mental health issues and lower test scores due to the instability in their lives. Without support, they will become our next generation of homeless adults. Therefore, this task force is working to create resources for teachers, judicial system staff and DCBS case workers in order to increase the safety net for these children now. This includes education about homeless children’s rights in school, community resources to stabilize children’s family’s lives and alternative education and disciplinary programs that strengthen children’s educational attainment.

I want to emphasize that we cannot stop providing the successful homeless programs we know are working for the majority of homeless individuals and families in our community, but until we begin to address the causes of the rising numbers of poor and homeless people within our community, the numbers will only continue to rise. It requires new ways of thinking, additional resources and non-traditional partners. We have begun to gather all three of these with the two efforts described above, but we need more partners to make real change. I challenge those who want to be part of this exciting movement to join us. For more information, go to www.louhousing.org or www.facebook.com/rxhousinglou. You can also see the 100K Homes (www.100khomes.org) video that shows the results of other communities’ work to house the street homeless at <http://www.youtube.com/user/100khomescampaign#p/u/6/Db-72KUuwpA>.

Natalie Harris is the Executive Director of The Coalition for the Homeless (CFH), a nonprofit organization committed to advocacy, education and collaboration on the issues of homelessness. The Coalition is a member agency that includes more than 30 homeless shelters and service providers serving Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky. Natalie has worked in the homeless and housing field for 24 years. She has served as a consultant to the U.S. Census Bureau, Corporation for Supportive Housing, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Urban Institute on issues related to rural homelessness and supportive housing. Natalie and the other CFH staff can be reached in their offices at 1300 S. Fourth St., Ste. 250, Louisville, KY 40208 (502 636-9550; email: nharris@louhomeless.org).

