

Homelessness in the Omaha/Council Bluffs metro area

Assessment of current needs and services, and options for action

Summary Report

Background

Wilder Research was asked by the Omaha Community Foundation to conduct a four-month study of homelessness in the Omaha and Council Bluffs area (April to July 2007). The primary purpose of the study is to assess current needs and identify potential strategies to support and build on the community's response to homelessness. This report describes the findings of that study and identifies opportunities for future action.

Findings

- Recent one-night estimates of the number of homeless adults, youth, and children in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area range between 1,750 and 1,900. According to the most recent survey of providers conducted by Wilder in June 2007, single men make up about one-half (48%) of the area's homeless population. Parents who are homeless with their children (mainly single mothers) together make up another 37 percent of the population. The remaining groups include women on their own (11%) and unaccompanied youth (4%).
- Current information systems are not able to provide a full description of the area's homeless population. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a useful tool for enumerating and describing some aspects of the population. Despite only six months of experience with a new data system, most providers are entering at least partial data. Even where participation is nearly full, however, HMIS data are of limited utility to describe the characteristics and needs of the homeless with adequate detail.
- An analysis of recent HMIS data shows that in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area, as in other major cities across the U.S., racial disparities in the shelter system are pronounced. In particular, African Americans and Latinos are substantially over-represented among the homeless compared to their numbers in the general population. This fact was not widely discussed by providers during the two public forums that preceded this report.
- There is substantial evidence of good quality planning work, most recently with the Decision Accelerator and previously in the Community Development Plan (using specialty networks) prepared by the Omaha City Planning Department and the Omaha Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (the predecessor of MACCH). While these plans identify most of the critical ingredients necessary for an effective community response to homelessness, they have been incompletely executed.
- Compared to other metropolitan areas of similar size, the approximately 1 to 1 ratio of emergency shelter beds to transitional and permanent supportive housing beds is unusual. During the past decade it has been more typical to hold down the growth of emergency beds and place greater emphasis on increasing the availability of transitional and permanent supportive housing units with ratios of 1 emergency bed to 2 or more transitional and supportive beds.

continued

Findings continued

- The inclusion of residential substance abuse treatment programs as a part of the continuum of shelter services (grouped here mainly with transitional housing) is also unusual. Federal funding does not consider residents of such programs “homeless.” In planning and proposal documents from communities of similar size, these are typically not included as a primary housing resource.
 - An analysis of current funding sources shows that, compared to other communities of similar size, private philanthropy bears an unusually large portion of the burden and that potential sources of public support are underrepresented in the overall mix. Potentially available federal dollars are also not being fully accessed, in part because the region’s funding requests do not match as well as they could with the federal priority on longer-term housing strategies.
 - Many components of the basic safety net are underfunded compared to current need, including affordable housing, emergency assistance for rent and utilities, and affordable, accessible health care (including mental health, substance abuse treatment, and prescriptions). Especially in light of the number of persons that area stakeholders report to be in need of mental health services, this situation makes it harder to prevent homelessness, and to serve those already interviewed with agency directors homeless and help them exit homelessness.
- Area service providers are in substantial consensus on the following points:
 - There should be a common goal to reduce or end homelessness.
 - The resources required to help poor people avoid homelessness and to exit homelessness after becoming homeless are less than adequate for an effective response.
 - The supply of housing that is available and affordable to low-income individuals and families, especially those with criminal histories and bad credit, is less than adequate.
 - There is a high demand for emergency shelter services, but limited funding for them. Some providers are concerned that an increased emphasis on prevention could result in even fewer resources being available to respond to the high levels of distress of those already in shelters.
 - There is a high level of interest in meeting the area’s needs for day services. However, most stakeholders who are not directly involved in providing such services do not appear to have strong opinions on how these needs should best be met. Based on the views that were shared with us as part of this assessment, it is not yet clear what role day services would play in an overall strategic plan for reducing or ending homelessness.
 - MACCH is widely endorsed as the right organization to lead area planning and implementation efforts. There is significant interest among providers to simply “... get on with it and get something done,” suggesting that there may be substantial benefit associated with the completion of a fully coordinated plan with goals, accountabilities, and some early achievable objectives that can be realized within a 6 to 12 month time frame.

Methods

Multiple data sources were used in this investigation including notes from site visits and community forums, local planning and proposal documents, in-depth phone and service providers, a web survey of forum participants, and a review of published literature of effective service strategies.

Opportunities for action

The following ideas represent a range of potential action opportunities for consideration by funders, service providers, elected officials, and other stakeholders:

Set a goal to reduce or end homelessness

1. Seek commitment from all stakeholders including public officials in municipal, county, and state government to set a goal of significantly reducing or ending homelessness over the next 10 years in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area. This goal can serve as a beginning point for the development of specific strategies and a rallying point for public interest. It can also serve as a starting point for the creation of a “10 year plan for ending long-term homelessness,” a type of blueprint for addressing chronic homelessness that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has encouraged and supported in cities and regions across America.

Collect more extensive data for planning

2. With MACCH leadership, in conjunction with or following the next January shelter count required by HUD (but early enough to ensure availability of data for the 2008 federal funding application), organize a more extensive data collection effort in order to more fully describe the population of people experiencing homelessness within the Continuum of Care region. This information can be used as a baseline planning document when setting targets for reducing or eliminating homelessness and as a tool for matching service needs with appropriate service provisions. Use of volunteer interviewers can also help build understanding and support for the needs of the homeless. During the same time period, Omaha providers can more fully implement the HMIS system as a method for tracking individual service users over time and as a method of meeting reporting requirements established by HUD.

3. Undertake a strategic planning initiative led by MACCH that builds on the previous Decision Accelerator and specifies a series of action steps and accountabilities.

Use current starting points to develop an action plan

4. In the strategic planning process, ensure that needs of homeless parents (mainly women) with children are separately assessed, and that shelter and program planning address the unique needs of this group. Also specifically address the distinct service needs of unaccompanied youth, who are some of the least visible and most vulnerable of persons who experience homelessness.

Address distinct needs of families and youth

5. Historically, poverty has been more concentrated in minority populations and this pattern is amplified among the homeless.

Address systemic causes of racial disparities

Virtually all studies of homelessness in the U.S. show a similar result. In the face of this, any plan for addressing and ending homelessness must take account of the potential causes of these disparities and respond appropriately, by improving access to education and job training, support for educational success, and access to equal employment and housing opportunities.

6. Over the next five years, seek to transition the role of private philanthropy to that of “gap funder” providing resources only in those cases

Use private philanthropy for gap funding

where no other resources can be found at the federal, state, county, or municipal level. Shift the general funding of crisis services, as feasible, to the public “safety net” with private funders moving toward the role of producing more of the “start-up capital” necessary to test new shelter and service models and create more permanent housing and related support services for homeless and very low-income people.

Opportunities for action continued

Create a technical assistance fund

7. Create a technical assistance fund for MACCH and area providers to assist with the development of proposals and other requests for funding and resources to assist the homeless, prevent homelessness, and provide access to housing and services that can help people escape homelessness. When the region's priorities are identified, such a fund could be used by the Continuum as an entity, or by the specific agencies developing the highest-priority projects, to hire a grant writer or project developer with the needed specialized expertise. It could also be a way to offer training to help increase the project planning and proposal development skills of agency staff in general.

Empower inter-agency housing pipeline committees

8. Consider forming a "housing pipeline committee" made up of members of the MACCH board, together with representatives from affordable housing development groups; city, county, and state government representatives; funders; and other potential stakeholders. Such a group could plan, oversee, and facilitate the creation of housing opportunities for low-income, precariously housed and homeless people. Because of jurisdictional boundaries, it may be best to have one committee for Douglas and Sarpy Counties and a second committee for the Pottawattamie County.

9. In addition to affordable housing, address other areas of weakness in the basic safety net of services that help to prevent homelessness and help people who are already homeless to get and maintain stable housing. These include mental health services, health care, education and job training, transportation, and emergency housing and utilities assistance.

Strengthen the basic safety net

Overall it is expected that an agreed-upon plan with specific goals describing how all partners will contribute and be held accountable is essential to long-term and incremental progress in addressing homelessness in the Omaha and Council Bluffs area.

Moving toward a plan that is squarely focused on reducing homelessness and enhancing self-sufficiency for the homeless and near-homeless will require a fully developed continuum of care; a flexible provider response; substantial cooperation and engagement among service providers, funders, local and state government, and the community at large; and cooperative service strategies that help connect homeless people with the available services.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of *Homelessness in the Omaha/Council Bluffs metro area*. For more information about this report, contact Erin Porterfield at the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH), 402-561-7597. The full report is available on the website of the Omaha Community Foundation (www.omahacf.org).

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