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| **Statewide Homeless Council – Mid Coast Forum – February 10, 2015** | | |
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**Statewide Homeless Council**

**– Mid Coast Forum –**

**February 10, 2015**

**Saint Patrick’s Church**

**380 Academy Hill Road**

**Newcastle, Maine**

Donna Kelley, Region 2 Homeless Council Representative to the Statewide Homeless Council (SHC), and co-organizer with Holly Stover of today’s meeting, formally welcomed everyone to the forum and reviewed the agenda.

Wes Phinney, Chair of the Statewide Homeless Council, introduced the Council members who were present today and gave a brief outline of the make-up of the council: three representatives from each of three regions across the state, as well as representatives from MaineHousing and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Cullen Ryan, also a Region 2 Representative to the SHC, provided some background information about how and why the SHC was created and gave a detailed overview of the **Maine Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness:**

**The Plan addresses 4 specific populations:**

* Single Adults (who may be Chronically Homeless or Circumstantially Homeless);
* Families (approximately 80% of whom are circumstantially homeless due to poverty, loss of work, etc.);
* Unaccompanied Youth (typically minors 12-18, but some programs can also serve young adults 18 to 24);
* Victims of Domestic Violence.

**The Plan also includes 4 major Goals:**

* To engage with people where they are and help them secure safe stable housing with appropriate supports;
* To increase the supply of affordable housing and rental subsidies;
* To address the mental, chemical and physical health needs of those experiencing homelessness; and
* To address the other underlying issues that lead to homelessness.

There is **a one-page summary of the plan posted at** [www.mainehomelessplanning.org](http://www.mainehomelessplanning.org) along with a great deal of other information about the Statewide Homeless Council, the Maine Continuum of Care, and MaineHousing’s Homeless Initiatives.

The Plan was first developed in 2008 and when HUD made HPRP (Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program) funds available in 2009, Maine was able to quickly and effectively implement programs based on the goals and strategies outlined in the Plan. Maine continued to work toward fulfilling the goals of the plan even after HPRP funding ended, with a focus on helping people secure stable housing with appropriate supports.

In 2013, the Oxford Street Shelter in Portland, the largest single adult shelter in the state with 130 beds, and 3 separate overflow facilities, was able to help over 700 people secure housing, but their overall occupancy numbers were not going down. Detailed analysis of how long people were staying at the shelter showed that most – about 80%, were there for less than 60 days, and of those, 55% were there for 2 weeks or less. However, about 5%, or 262 people out of more than 3500 who stayed throughout the year, were there for 180 days or longer. While this was a small percentage of the annual population, they were occupying the vast majority of the shelter’s beds each night.

**In 2014 SHC began The Longer Term Stayer Initiative**. This focuses effort and resources on those clients who have been in shelter for 180 days or longer over the course of a year. Maine Dept. Health and Human Services (DHHs), prioritized Shelter Plus Care (S+C) and Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) vouchers for this population. This and other efforts by the City, MaineHousing, and the Portland Housing Authority have allowed the City of Portland to close two of their three overflow facilities. Helping the Long Term Stayers secure stable housing frees up shelter beds for those who only need short term shelter. SHC has recently developed a new Housing Prioritization Chart to help keep this effort moving forward.

There were some questions from those in attendance:

**How is all this being funded?**

* The SHC itself does not have or control any funds. Shelters are funded from a number of sources including state and federal grants, charitable donations and local fundraising. Voucher Programs and funds to develop new supportive housing come through federal and state programs.

**Is there enough funding to house everyone?**

* There are enough resources to house all of the Long Term Stayers we have identified, but we need to target them appropriately.

**Is there enough housing?**

* No. Many places have very low vacancy rates these days, meaning there are more people competing for each available unit, and the prices tend to go up – supply and demand. Even people who have a voucher in hand often cannot find affordable housing, or units that will pass inspection.

**What about clients who are ‘Hard to House’ because of criminal histories or other issues?**

* There are some programs that can serve these populations – BRAP, for example.

**How many vouchers are there in Maine and can we get more?**

* Each Housing Authority has a finite number of vouchers (or dollars) that HUD allocates annually based largely on utilization rates, which is not the same as ‘need’. Shelter Plus Care vouchers are funded through Continuum of Care Grants, which bring about $10 Million a year to Maine, about 85% for S+C. BRAP is funded through DHHS with state funds, and MaineHousing’s STEP program is funded through FedHOME. As far as developing new housing units, MaineHousing uses StateHOME funds, which depend upon the Real Estate Transfer Tax. There are also other pots of money for specific populations such as Youth, Domestic Violence, and Veterans.

**Are all vouchers alike?**

* Generally, they all have an initial expiration date, usually 90 days, during which people need to find housing before the voucher expires. Some are considered permanent, like HCV and S+C, while others are for shorter terms, like STEP and BRAP. And they all have some strings attached. Some are Project Based, meaning they are attached to a particular building, while most in Maine are Tenant Based, so the client used the voucher in a rental unit in the community, and can take it with them if they move – usually. BRAP and S+C vouchers are for people with certain disabilities. All of these have rent guidelines and the units have to pass an inspection. Other restrictions are mostly up to each housing authority or program. The only two big federal restrictions are in regard to lifetime registered sex offenders and anyone convicted of the manufacture or distribution of methamphetamine in federally subsidized housing.

Holly Stover, one of the organizers of the meeting today, introduced herself. Holly works for DHHS at a statewide level and has attended SHC for some time, but she is also a member of this community and is therefore very aware of **the issues surrounding homelessness in this area.**

* There are **shelters in Brunswick and Rockport, but nothing in between** except a few Domestic Violence Safe Homes, but these do not serve general populations.
* There is lots of **seasonal employment** here – fishing, clamming, and the jobs that spring up to support those – but those are all drying up.
* There are lots of **problems with substance abuse**, alcohol, pills and increasingly, heroin.
* **Poverty here is often multigenerational**, people just getting by, year after year, depending on family and neighbors.
* There is also an **increasingly stark income disparity** with extreme wealth side by side with desperate poverty. There are Billionaires moving to this part of the coast, which also has food pantries regularly serving hundreds of families a week.
* There are many local community groups – grassroots efforts – trying to help, but they are so spread out - there is **no ‘service center’ and there is no ‘system’** like would develop in a larger city or town.
* The area participated in the recent Point-in-Time Count, in the hope of establishing that some level of need exists here. It was a good effort with many volunteers and it is something the community can build on.

Wes thanked Holly and Donna again for organizing the meeting today, and then asked those in attendance from the community to provide any information, feedback, ideas, or insights they would like to bring forward.

* **Waitlists for any type of affordable housing are long**, often two years or more, because there are so few units and they do not turn over unless someone is evicted or dies. Some people can find a place they can afford during the winter, but rents double or triple in the summer and they have to leave. **Are there any plans to develop a shelter or some transitional housing in this area** to help?
  + HUD is no longer putting money toward shelters, or new Transitional Housing (TH). The focus now is on permanent housing and rapid rehousing (sometime with short term subsidy).
  + Stepping Stones in Damariscotta is planning to develop two duplex units for transitional housing.
  + TH does not always lead to long term stability. People often get into, or are placed in TH when what they really need is permanent supported housing or a long term subsidy, but there are none available at the time, so they get TH, but cannot sustain housing when their time is up.
  + For people who can ‘transition’ to stability, a short term subsidy may be a better option than trying to build a new TH facility.
* **Many people in the area can get vouchers, through MaineHousing, S+C, local Housing Authorities, but they cannot find housing.** Sometimes it is a matter of the client’s history and landlords not wanting to rent to them, but the affordability and inspection guidelines of the voucher programs are also barriers.
  + CHOM has some projects in the area specifically build to house folks who need supportive housing, and they meet all the rent and inspection criteria.
  + MaineHousing is currently trying to connect vouchers, LIHTC projects, and supportive services through a new Request for Proposal.
  + Services are critical to help resolve the underlying issues that led to homelessness in the first place. Whether that is mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, lack of job skills, bad money management… whatever the issue was, it will happen again if not addressed through services.
* Debora Keller said the **Bath Housing Authority recently conducted a very thorough Housing Assessment Survey.** The report is on their website at [www.BathHousing.org](http://www.BathHousing.org) .
  + 54% of their applicants are from Bath or the immediate area, and another 22% are from outlying towns.
  + 10% are Veterans.
  + 50% self-report having some type of disability.
  + 40% are families with children.
  + 43% are currently renting.
  + 9% currently own a home.
  + 46% self-report they are living doubled up, or are homeless.
  + 19% report that affordability is the main issue.

**Maine in general, and Bath in particular, has both an aging population, and an aging housing stock. 1 in 6 people are living in unstable housing situations** – either paying more than 50% of their income for housing, or living in housing that is unfit. Debora said that she was very interested in how MaineHousing is restructuring their HCV Program to work more closely with shelters and Bath is looking into ways they might be able to make similar changes.

* Rob Parritt, Director of Oxford Street Shelter in Portland, pointed out that **‘Housing’ Case Management is very different from what most people and most agencies think of as Case Management, and it takes a very different skill set.** You need to be able to develop and maintain good working relationships with landlords so that they will work with your clients, knowing they have supports in place, and someone they, the landlord, can call if there is a problem.
* Rob also **said programs need to move away from the idea of chronological waitlists** – it seems “fair” to do first come, first served, but people are waiting years, regardless of their situation. Agencies need to be able **to prioritize applicants based upon their need**, using an accurate and objective assessment tool to do this, not just go with the ‘squeaky wheel’ approach. **They need to move toward data driven decision making.**
* Craig Phillips from Tedford Housing said that his program currently has three units available in the Bath area, but clients need to have a voucher in hand. He encouraged other agencies to call, to not just assume that the shelter or other housing programs are full – they may be, but if there is an opening they can help. He also said their **outreach teams are seeing more homeless youth** – High School, Junior High, even Elementary School aged – all seem to be increasing. Jon Bradley, from Preble Street, said the Homeless Youth Provider Group will be **conducting a Homeless Youth Count in May** to try to get a more accurate picture of the situation.
* Courtney O’Brien, SASSMM, said the Midcoast may not have a visible homeless population, but they are out there, sleeping in boats, camps, summer homes….
* **PATH Outreach workers are limited in this area**, mostly because PATH funding is allocated based on shelter numbers, **but they can work with clients here** and are a great resource for information.
* Valerie Hinkley from Midmaine Community Action said **that many people who apply for heating assistance have no idea what else they might be eligible for**. Cindy Namer, MaineHousing, suggested the **CAP agencies could be the link that ties the area together.** They are often one of the first places people go for help, and they could utilize the HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) to help track their programs and services, and connect clients to other resources.
* Carol Kulesza, VA, said **there are 2 SSVF (Supportive Services for Veteran Families) Grant recipients who could serve this area** – Preble Street (1-800-377-5709) and Veteran’s Inc. (207-240-2566). Washington Hancock Community Action also has SSVF and might be able to help in the Waldo County area.
* Tom Ptacek said that **advocacy and awareness are important**. This **is especially true with landlords and developers**. There is a funnel in the current system where people get stuck. They may have supports and vouchers but if there are no affordable apartments that will pass inspection they have no place to go. Landlords and developers are business people. They buy up old buildings or build new ones to make money, but they need renters, and they need programs that will help them fix and maintain their units – their investments. They **need to see that creating affordable housing and renting to low income or formerly homeless families can work. They can help people and get stable tenants. It can be a win-win.** They should be part of the local discussion.
* Many of the situations described here today are life and death – people can freeze out in the cold. Many of the ideas raised are good – but most are long term. **What about short term solutions? Warming Centers** where people can get in out of the cold for a while? Local churches often do this. Can they work together to set up a regular schedule so that people will know where to go each day? **Also need to develop some prevention strategies.**
* **Transportation is a huge issue in this area**. Even in Bath people struggle to get to Brunswick for services. Coastal Transport does some, but serves a limited area. Community Concepts is the same. Boothbay Rotary provides taxi vouchers for elderly. Often these services are only available for medical appointments.
* Cindy Namer **encouraged everyone to get involved with the Region 2 Homeless Council and the Maine Continuum of Care, as well as the Statewide Council.** Most meetings now have call-in or teleconferencing options to save on travel. There is information about schedules, agendas, minutes and other important resources available at [**www.mainehomelessplanning.org**](http://www.mainehomelessplanning.org)**.** You can subscribe to get notifications when new information is posted on topics of interest. We can look into creating a section just for this area.
* Amy Winston **asked if Region 2 is also focusing efforts only on LTS’s now,** and if this area has to do the same? The Regions are all following the same Statewide Plan, but each is able to look at what the needs and resources are in their area and decide what aspects of the Plan they are going to focus on. Even within Regions, there may be differences from county to county, town to town, and those can be factored in. **The entire state is working on the LTS initiative, and if there is anyone in this area who would meet the criteria, they should be prioritized for whatever assistance is available. If this group wants to establish other local needs or priorities, they should bring that to the Region 2 Homeless Council** – Don Harden will include everyone here today in the Region 2 email list. The larger groups – R2HC and MCOC – are working hard and have lots of good ideas and information, but they need local input, involvement and effort.
* Holly thanked everyone for attending today, for sharing their ideas and for wanting to make a difference. Despite all the struggles and difficulties discussed today, there are also many good and positive things happening in the area and we should not lose sight of that. Cindy **encouraged everyone** **to take what they learned here today back to their local groups and communities and try to leverage local resources to develop these ideas into actions**.
* **Mary Ellen Barnes volunteered to organize a follow up meeting** for all those interested in helping to develop the ideas brought forth here today and moving this effort forward. The shelters in Brunswick and Rockport both have services, resources and workers who can reach into this area but they need to know who to connect with here.  **We need to map out all the agencies, resources, programs, etc. in the area so people know who to call**. Many communities are good at addressing needs on a case by case basis but need to be more organized and more connected to other providers in order to leverage resources and fill gaps. Mary Ellen will send information out to everyone in attendance here today, and folks should feel free to share it with as many other people as possible. Local Housing Authorities and S+C Local Administrative Agencies should also be invited.

Meeting Adjourned: 1:50

**Next SHC Meeting:**

March 10, 2015, from 9:30 to 2:00 at MaineHousing, 353 Water Street, Augusta ME