Statewide Homeless Council

Lewiston Auburn Forum

Community Concepts, 240 Bates St., Lewiston

December 10, 2013

Present:

Cullen Ryan, Community Housing of Maine, and Region 2 Representative to SHC

Don Harden, Catholic Charities and Co-Chair of Region 2 Homeless Council

Michael Burke, Chief Executive Officer for Community Concepts of Maine

Gail Kezer, Office of U.S. Senator Angus King, Jr.

Cindy Namer, Director of Homeless Initiatives for MaineHousing

Jon Bradley, Preble Street Resource Center, and Region 1 Representative to SHC

Elizabeth Szatkowski, The Opportunity Alliance, and Region 1 Representative to SHC

Chet Barnes, Maine Dept Health & Human Services, Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services

Holly Stover, Maine Dept. Health & Human Services, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

David Projansky, Maine Dept. Health & Human Services, Office of Aging and Disability Services

Jerry DeWitt, Tri-County Mental Health, & Androscoggin Maine Military & Community Network

Betty King, Home Together – Emmaus, Bath & Bath Initiative on Homelessness

Annisa Abdi,United Somali Women of Maine

Thomas Ptacek, Homeless Voices for Justice

Judy Harris, Consumer Council System

Janice Lara-Hewey, Catholic Charities of Maine, PATH Program Coordinator

Patricia Lehmann, Catholic Charities of Maine, PATH Outreach Coordinator

Charles Soule, Lewiston Veteran’s Administration

Sabrina Abbott, Saint Mary’s Hospital

Melanie LaMore Gagnon, Safe Voices

Giff Jamison, Operations Director for Tedford Housing

Joel Furrow, The Root Cellar, Lewiston

Jedidiah Shattuck, Refuge Community Church

Christine Hufnagel, Community Concepts

Dri Huber, Youth Move Maine

Kristin Thorp, Youth Move Maine

Bob Rowe, Executive Director of New Beginnings

Jeannine Dubay, Lewiston Housing Authority

Suzanne Boras, Maine Dept. Health & Human Services

Alan Plummer, Verterans, Inc.

Kerry Polyot-Stefani, Stepping Stones

Dot Treadwell, Consumer Council System

Ray Michaud, Veterans, Inc.

Melissa Dunn, Neighborhood Housing League

Michelle Dubay, Maine Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole

Carolyn Cutting, Veterans, Inc.

Pamela Morin, Androscoggin Head Start and Childcare

Cecilia Leland, Maine Dept. Health and Human Services

Darcy Wilcox, Maine Pretrial Services

Jamie Caouette, Health Affiliates of Maine

Joseph Hufnagel, Wayfinder Schools

Ray Polley

Scott Tibbitts, MaineHousing

**Welcome and Introductions:**

Cullen Ryan began the meeting with a review of the agenda for the day. He then gave a brief history of the Statewide Homeless Council and its advisory role to the Governor and Legislature. He also described the Council’s current make up, including representatives from Service Provider Agencies from across the state and from a number of Maine Governmental Agencies.

Cullen then provided an overview of the Maine Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness, detailing the Plan’s structure and evolution. The Plan is intended to unite Homeless Service Providers in a common vision and strategy to address homelessness at many levels and for a variety of populations. Different sections of the Plan focus on Families, Individuals, Youth, and those fleeing Domestic Violence. It also distinguishes between those who are ‘circumstantially homeless’, such as from the loss of a job, and those who are ‘chronically homeless’, often due to other serious underlying conditions such as untreated mental illness or substance abuse issues. The Plan is made up of a number of Goals and Action Steps, and each of the Regional Homeless Councils may focus on different Goals depending on the needs identified in their area. The overarching Goal is to provide permanent housing with adequate and appropriate supports to help everyone remain stably housed. Copies of the Plan, minutes from meetings of the Statewide Homeless Council, and lots of other important information can be found at <http://www.mainehomelessplanning.org>

Several folks mentioned the Lewiston Auburn 10 Year Plan to Eliminate Homelessness (available at <http://www.unitedwayandro.org/Ending_Homelessness.php> ), and drew some parallels between it and the State Plan. There was a great deal of enthusiasm around the local plan when it was created, but implementation has been challenging.

By this time in the meeting, it seemed that everyone had arrived and settled in, so Cullen asked that everyone introduce themselves and describe their involvement in efforts to end homelessness in Maine. It was great to see such a large and diverse group.

Bob Rowe, Executive Director of New Beginnings, formally welcomed everyone to the forum on behalf of LAASH, The Lewiston Auburn Alliance for Services to the Homeless. He thanked the Statewide Homeless Council for coming to Lewiston and for their interest in discussing local issues and concerns. He also thanked Don Harden of Catholic Charities for his effort to organize this forum, and Michael Burke of Community Concepts for hosting today and he reminded everyone there were vans available after the meeting for those interested in a tour of some of the local programs.

Bob then took the opportunity to invite everyone to attend LAASH meetings, held the first Wednesday of each month from noon to 1:30 at Lewiston City Hall, and announced that the annual Homeless Vigil in recognition of those who are homeless and to memorialize those who have died while homeless, will be held on December 20th, the longest night of the year.

Bob pointed out that this meeting is being held in a poor section of a very poor city. One third of Maine’s poor children are living in ‘concentrated poverty’ within a couple square miles of this location. New Beginnings, as an agency, is concerned about the way the state of Maine looks at youth services and the funding of those services: Child Protective, Foster Care, Group Homes, etc. Recently, the Halcyon House Youth Shelter closed – not for lack of need, but for lack of funding. There used to be seven youth shelters in Maine. Now there are only 3, and New Beginnings is the only one in the state now open 24/7 - the others are strictly overnight shelters, and while they do have associated day programs in their areas, the clients still must leave the shelter each morning – even in the winter, in Maine. There is a Youth section in the state Plan, and SHC has voted to support keeping what funding had been awarded to Halcyon House within the Region 2 area of the state, but **the need for Youth services is still great**.

Cullen acknowledged this, and asked the group what other local issues needed to be brought forward – he encouraged everyone to participate in the dialogue.

**Access to General Assistance is a problem**. Many people who are homeless do not have any resources at all – no transportation to get to interviews and no regular access to computers – many places only take applications on-line these days. GA insists that they ‘work’ at least 16 hours a week for non-profit organizations, but they are only given a few hours at a time, so it takes a week or more to get 16 hours. Teens and young adults are not even able to apply – they are told to ask their parents for help – even if they have kids of their own.

Several of those present who run or work for non-profit agencies stated they would be willing to help people get those 16 hours of work to meet GA requirements. Veterans, Inc. said they will be opening a Veteran’s shelter in the area soon and are seeking volunteers for many tasks.

There has been a debate for many years as to **whether or not this community should develop a new general shelter**. It’s not even a question of “need” because the need is obvious. The problem is more political. The current mayor openly condemns those who are homeless, and the city council voted against VOA developing low income housing in Lewiston, even after the fires and with hundreds of units being condemned. People have complained for years about the existing ‘general’ shelters, but nothing has ever been done about it. And beyond that, there is no ‘system’ in L/A like there is in Portland or Bangor – everything is fragmented and operates in isolation. There is no on central hub, no coordination, no inter-agency communication.

Maine was recently ranked number 2 in the nation for student homelessness by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Not sure where their data came from. Getting accurate Point-in-time numbers have always been a problem in this area, due to the nature of the shelters here and the fact that most of the people who should be counted do not go there. But the Data is what drives funding now, so we need to get better at this. The people here have a sense of hoe big the problem is, and the people who are homeless know, but the general community does not get it – or ignores it – or worse, blames those who are homeless – they do not see it as a problem they need to do something about. Homelessness is not as generally visible here as it is in Portland or Bangor – it is ‘contained’ downtown, to a few specific areas.

If the ‘powers that be’ that acknowledged there was homelessness here, they would have to do something about it. They did acknowledge it - the two cites developed a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. They only did that because it was linked to CDBG funding. What have they done to actually implement the plan? Is there anyone here today representing the city governments of either Lewiston or Auburn? (No.) Is there anyone here from either of the two general shelters? (No.) And there was also no one from the media – how could they have missed it? As for the mayor, he was just re-elected, so apparently people agree with his positions. Not necessarily, if you look at voter turn out– he only got 18% of the ‘eligible’ vote - most people just didn’t show up. That’s the bigger problem – we need to get people to interested – angry even – enough to do something about it. We need advocacy at all levels.

Back to the idea of developing another adult shelter – it needs to be acknowledged that Saint Martins and Hope Haven do provide shelter to large number of people in the area. But they have a very narrow idea of who they will serve. They boot people for reasons other shelters would not. There are lots of stories about how at Hope Haven they try to ‘cure’ people of things like addictions and homosexuality by ‘laying on of hands’ – if people complain it just gets ignored – its never in the papers or in court – people just refuse to go there. One person present said that she had gone to Hope Haven when she was homeless. It took four hours to get a bed, and only then because she told them she had been “saved” – while there she saw people turned away lots of things – one man for having tattoos – and a gay man was surrounded by people putting their hands on his head and praying to cast out demons.

When New Beginnings wanted to move from Greene to Lewiston, there was a great deal of opposition. They had to threaten legal action before the city would allow it. There were a number of laws on the books then that basically criminalized homelessness. The situation has improved, at least in that regard, but there is no funding to develop shelters now. We cannot document the need because of the lack of shelter beds in the area, but we cannot create more shelter beds without showing the need – it’s a circular argument. We need to find a way to access the resources to create a secular shelter. But HUD is not interested in new shelters. None the less – that is what we need here – we are really still back in the 80’s here on this issue.

The Maine Military and Community Network coordinated volunteers for the Point-in-Time last year and counted over 70 people in Androscoggin, Oxford and Franklin Counties – this is not just a Lewiston Auburn issue. But in rural areas where there are no shelters, or the ones there are full, people are basically sent to L/A to get services. But L/A doesn’t really have much to offer – they don’t even talk to each other about this stuff – as mentioned earlier, there is no system in place to connect people to what they need.

LAASH (Lewiston Auburn Association of Services for the Homeless) has been trying to better coordinate things here for years – it is clear what the problems are – but its also easy to get swamped by the general inertia of the community as a whole. Its not fair to just say L/A needs a Portland type solution – but as the second largest concentration of population in the state, it is worthy of its own solution. When the fires struck, there was an incredible sense of urgency and a lot of great collective work and effort – how can we direct that energy toward addressing homelessness? With the fires, people were seen as victims – again, the public perception of homelessness here tends to view it as the person’s own fault. This goes back to advocacy and raising awareness in the community so people understand the root causes of homelessness.

At this point Cullen tried to summarize the major points – the gaps and needs that had been identified thus far - and asked that the group try to focus on each one in terms of solutions.

1. **A secular Adult Shelter**
2. **Coordinated system of providers and referrals**
3. **Identify and access resources**
4. **Data**
5. **Public Opinion**

In terms of **Data**, the Point-in-Time (PIT) count is coming up again in January – Wednesday the 29th. This is a nation wide effort, which HUD requires for Continuum of Care Funding, but the data is used for many other things as well. HUD has just issued new guidance for the upcoming count, so MaineHousing will be reviewing that and incorporating it into the PIT forms and instructions, which will then be shared with all the providers and volunteers who participate.

Portland is working to collect additional information based on the 100,000 Homes Campaign survey. This is also a national effort and it has already begun to help them in terms of advocacy, and reaching out to community members like businesses and landlords who do not typically participate in the discussions on homelessness.

That’s great, for Portland and maybe it could be done in other areas of the state, but the PIT is HUD driven and very specific – we need to be sure the data we collect is usable, and can be put in HMIS. Not sure the 100,000 Homes Survey can, or how much overlap there might be – it could be very burdensome and confusing for volunteers to try to do both at the same time. It does not do us any good to collect a lot of information if we cannot use it. It might be better to keep the two separate – PIT in the winter, when HUD requires it, and 100,000 Homes survey in the summer.

**Resources:** The cities developed a Plan – even if it was for CDBG, what did they say they were going to do about homelessness, and how can we get them to do it – wouldn’t continued CDBG funding be dependant on them showing that they did what they said? Was any of the money supposed to go to homeless programs?

The Maine Peoples’ Alliance has many initiatives around housing. They have tried to develop some housing policies and present them to the local city councils, but without the support of the councils, the proposals are slashed or totally disregarded.

HUD wants local Housing Authorities to work with homeless service providers to address this – Portland is doing it – and MaineHousing. Can the Lewiston and Auburn HA’s? They can, if they have vouchers available.

**Shelter:** Has any location been identified? The B Street Center would seem ideal – services are already established there, and there are rooms that could be used for overnight shelter space. Apparently, the idea has been brought up but the city will not allow it.

There are lots of buildings around here that need major renovations – we have clients who need jobs, or need to do community service work, and people who can volunteer their time and skills – can we get an agency to coordinate a program that would provide job training to rehab these buildings to create more affordable housing? Sort of like what Habitat for Humanity does but on an apartment building scale, not just single family homes.

The problem with ‘affordable housing’ is that it isn’t. Not without a voucher. All those building that are being condemned – slated to be torn down – were the only places that ‘poor’ people could afford – and only because the landlords only did the bare minimum they had to in order to put people in.

We need to have a serious group of people – both from the community and from outside it - sit down and look at the shelter question. Maybe the result will be that we do NOT want to build one – that we want to take a different approach – but the question needs to be resolved so we can move on.

**Public Opinion:** Personal stories often have more impact than data and numbers. Can agencies and individuals contact the local media and get these stories covered? Everyone should make a point of contact their local city counselors and talk to them about homelessness – not just once – but regularly – for a relationship – make them see it in the larger context. The upcoming PIT count would be a great way to start this conversation.

After a break for Lunch, Cullen talked about other SHC efforts, such as the Long Term Stayers Initiative that was presented at the Maine Housing Conference in October which seeks to coordinate housing vouchers and other resources to house those who have stayed in shelters the longest. In Portland, the Oxford Street Shelter has 130 beds. They also now have 3 Overflow locations to accommodate the approximately 2566 people they see annually. They also have about 116 Long Term Stayers – people who were in the shelter for at least 180 of the last 365 days. That’s about 5% of the annual count. That means that on any given night, about 116 beds are being used by these folks, leaving only 14 beds available to the other 2400+ clients who turn over more quickly. If the LTS initiative can house those folks, the shelter would not need all this overflow space, and could focus on the need of those who are in immediate crisis, not those for whom homelessness is a chronic condition.

SHC is also looking at how other states are finding resources, or new ways to use existing ones. For example, in states where Medicaid was not expanded, some states have used a “1115 Waiver” that allows for certain types of community based services to billable. SHC has also drafted a White Paper on this to send to the Governor for his consideration.

SHC has also been working with DHHS on Discharge Planning Guidelines and has recent received a final draft of a policy from the Maine Hospital Association. Cindy asked if this had been approved by SHC, because it should be included in the new Continuum of Care Application. In light of this, a motion was made and SHC voted to approve the Hospital Discharge Planning Guidelines.

Cullen thanked everyone for attending and participating in today’s forum – it was a great meeting, a great discussion, and he encouraged everyone to attend SHC, LAASH, Region 2 Homeless Council, and Continuum meetings – to stay involved, to stay focused and to keep this momentum going!