

Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Homelessness

By Alex Vuocolo

In our first issue-profile to prepare readers for the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference, we provide an overview of homelessness in the Greater Philadelphia region.

Introduction

The issues being addressed at this year's DVG Conference to a large extent stem from deeply embedded poverty in the city and increasingly in the suburban counties of the Greater Philadelphia region, whether it's health insurance access, youth safety, hunger, early literacy or homelessness.

Unfortunately, the damage caused by these problems can be hard to see and thus hard to understand and react to. This is perhaps less the case when it comes to homelessness, a problem that insists upon itself through the visibility of its worst-affected victims.

But how much do these examples – whether its makeshift bedding in the entranceway of a church or people asking for money on a highway median – tell us about homelessness in the Philadelphia region?

To start, here are some statistics: the city's total population of unsheltered individuals has fluctuated between roughly 400 and 600 over the past few years, according to U.S. census data. But this statistic only touches the surface of the problem. While the current number of unsheltered homeless is around 494, there are over 12,000 people a year that experience homelessness for a limited time, according to the city's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services.

State-wide, there are 6,947 people in emergency shelters, 6,714 in transitional housing and 1,076 that are unsheltered, according to 2012 data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

There are also drastically different demographics within the homeless population, each with unique vulnerabilities and needs. The same system that serves victims of domestic abuse must also serve LGBTQ youth or individuals with severe medical or mental health problems.

In addition, the causes of homelessness vary drastically; this list from the Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing reflects a number of organizations' view of what causes homelessness:

- poverty from a lack of good jobs
- lack of affordable housing
- lack of affordable healthcare
- domestic violence
- mental illness
- substance abuse
- discharge from institutions i.e. prisons without appropriate planning

With such diverse causes and affected demographics, homelessness is combated on multiple fronts, from emergency shelters to affordable housing, from life-saving medical assistance to long-term rehabilitation.

Opportunities & Innovation

What's working? Here we take a look at the broad overview of the strategies, collaborations and innovations being used throughout the Greater Philadelphia region.

Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Homelessness

By Alex Vuocolo

The Philadelphia Continuum of Care contains short-term services, such as emergency shelters and medical assistance, and long-term and preventative care, such as substance abuse rehabilitation, psychological assistance, outreach, transitional housing and advocacy. The overall goal of the continuum is to bring a homeless individual through each stage of care until they are independent and living in permanent housing.

Some organizations provide multiple levels of care, such as Horizon House, a nonprofit based in Philadelphia, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties. It provides medical assistance and emergency shelters as well preventative and long-term programs, including transitional housing, family reunification and an initiative to help substance abusers maintain sobriety.

Project HOME is another broad-based nonprofit organization with a hand in multiple levels of care and advocacy, including medical care, housing and education. In many ways, Project HOME is a nexus for organizations and government agencies working on homelessness in the region.

Other organizations have a narrower set of services. Bethesda Project and Dignity Housing, for example, focus primarily on housing options. Dignity Housing manages 60 units of affordable housing concentrated in North Philadelphia. Bethesda Project connects homeless with a full range of housing options, including drop-in centers, shelters, safe-havens, transitional housing and affordable housing. (Definitions of these housing types can be found here.)

Specific areas of support also include job training, mental health services, advocacy and housing retention.

Housing retention – perhaps the most preventative measure – is often taken on by government initiatives and community development corporations. The New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC), based in the Riverwards of North Philadelphia, provides energy assistance, housing counseling, foreclosure prevention, first-time homebuyer assistance and rental rebates. The City of Philadelphia’s Office of Supportive Housing also provides mortgage assistance in targeted zip codes that are experiencing a housing crisis.

As for job training, there are a number of organizations that work with homeless as well as low-income and other disadvantaged demographics. But a few have made homeless care their primary mission.

Ready, Willing and Able, for example, is a job training program that provides transitional housing, adult basic education, job placement and social support services. 100 percent of the individuals they serve are homeless.

Healthcare organizations tend to be more broad-based, serving other groups besides homeless, but organizations such as the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) and the Mental Health Association of South-eastern Pennsylvania are deeply involved in helping other organizations working with the homeless to administer medical and psychiatric care.

Taken together, these organizations form a rough outline of the types of organizations in the Philadelphia region’s continuum of care. However, there are alternatives to the continuum of care model. Another model called “Housing First” puts homeless individuals directly into housing and then brings services to them. The idea is to get individuals into a stable environment as soon as possible.

Chester County’s “Decade to Doorways” plan for ending homelessness exemplifies this model by focusing on getting individuals and families into housing first and foremost. The county-wide initiative is attempting to end homelessness by 2022 through rapid re-housing and housing retention programs, rather than bolstering emergency relief programs and creating more temporary shelters.

Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Homelessness

By Alex Vuocolo

Montgomery County similarly developed a model for addressing homelessness that focuses on affordable housing and housing retention. The initiative, called “Your Way Home,” has created a centralized entry point for people in danger of losing their home. At the center, as well a number of smaller resource centers scattered throughout the county, resident can access emergency grants and rapid rehousing services.

Regardless of the approach, homelessness is indeed one of the most layered issues facing the region. With varied causes and affected demographics, the number of organizations and methods are diverse, and it is clear that a number of innovations and collaborations are already in the works.

Still, there is so much left to do. For a deeper look at how this issue is evolving, attend the breakout session The Road Home: Seeking solutions for the many faces of homelessness at the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference.

Helping to ignite that conversation will be:

- Bia Vieira, The Philadelphia Foundation
- Mimi Box, JBJ Soul Foundation
- Liz Hersh, Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania
- Dainette Mintz, City of Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing
- Kathy Phifer, Montgomery County Department of Housing & Community Development

Further Reading

Want to dig deeper? Check out these useful resources and reports for understanding homelessness and homeless care.

State of Homelessness in America

This report by the Homeless Research Institute looks at homeless statistics across the country. It explores economic and housing factors as well demographics and household factors

Services for Housing Intervention for Families in Transition

The National Center on Family Homelessness made this report to highlight risk factors for families in threat of homelessness and to outline strategies for retaining housing.

Chester County “Decade to Doorways” Plan

As discussed above, this plan outlines Chester County’s comprehensive plan for dealing with homelessness over the next decade.

Homelessness Analytics

A web-tool designed by Philadelphia-based developers Azavea that maps homeless statistics across the U.S.

This article was originally posted on

