

HOMELESSNESS IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY

SUMMARY

The Humboldt County Grand Jury reviewed the efforts being made by local government entities and service providers to assist the homeless in Humboldt County.

The Humboldt County Grand Jury finds:

- There is no coordinated, countywide approach that encompasses a single intake, assessment and distribution of services for the homeless in Humboldt County.
- There is no oversight or coordination among the many dedicated homeless service providers throughout Humboldt County. Such oversight and coordination would decrease duplication of effort, increase efficiency, save tax dollars, cut costs for the providers, and create a revenue stream for affordable housing.
- There is a lack of coordination and collaboration between Humboldt County Board of Supervisors and the Eureka City Council around the issue of homelessness.
- There is a critical lack of affordable housing in Humboldt County.

The Humboldt County Grand Jury calls on the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors and the Eureka City Council to form a housing trust fund structured as a Joint Powers Authority (JPA), which includes the current Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition to coordinate and administer Humboldt County's efforts to address and end homelessness. The Humboldt County Grand Jury also recommends the JPA include representation from all stakeholders in Humboldt County.

BACKGROUND

Homelessness is a complex, deep-rooted issue that can be tied to poverty, unemployment, poor health, family violence, crime, incarceration, divorce, mental illness, substance abuse, and exhaustion of friend or family support, all of which take different skill sets, services, and resources to address. While one of these root causes can be enough to push individuals and families into homelessness, there are co-occurring causes, such as mental illness and substance abuse, which makes administering assistance even more complex. Homelessness will aggravate individuals' and families' current conditions, making it even more difficult to access opportunities and regain the ability for them to support themselves.

Communities feel the impact of homelessness socially, environmentally, and fiscally.

- Socially, homelessness can cause residents to become fearful and concerned for their safety. Also, a community can become politically divided over how to deal with the homeless issue.
- Environmental concerns include proper disposal of hazardous materials, garbage and waste,

fire, and wilderness damage.

- The costs associated with homelessness are significant because of a higher instance of use of emergency services such as police and ambulance response, emergency room visits, operation of shelters, substance abuse treatment facilities, crime, and incarceration.

On May 20, 2009, President Obama signed the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act 2009. Administered and funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), one of the provisions of this act is for communities to implement rapid rehousing - the practice of helping individuals and families quickly move out of homelessness and into permanent housing and provide flexible support services to help them sustain housing. Studies (Addendum: United States Interagency Council on Homelessness) have found that the rapid rehousing model has a success rate between 80 and 90%, meaning residents are still in permanent housing two to three years after initial placement.

To support rapid rehousing, HUD established the Continuum of Care (CoC), a local or regional system, to organize and deliver housing and services to meet the specific needs of the homeless or those in imminent risk of homelessness as they move to stable housing and maximum self-sufficiency.

HUD identifies (Addendum: Evaluation of Continuums of Care for Homeless People – Final Report) the fundamental components of a comprehensive CoC to be:

- Outreach, intake, and assessment to identify the specific needs of homeless individuals and families and link them to appropriate housing and/or services
- Emergency shelter and safe alternatives to life on the street
- Transitional housing with supportive services to help people develop the skills necessary for permanent housing
- Permanent housing and permanent supportive housing

Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition

Established in 2004, the Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition (HHHC) is the designated Continuum of Care for Humboldt County and supported by the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Composed of several organizations, service providers, developers, government agencies, faith-based groups, and community members, HHHC is dedicated to ending homelessness. Some of their accomplishments are:

- Production of the Homeless Connect Day
- Coordination and implementation of the Point in Time Count
- Development of the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness
- Expanding the number of available permanent supportive housing apartments for chronically homeless individuals in Humboldt County

- Opening extreme weather shelters for homeless clients in Eureka and McKinleyville with plans to open another shelter soon in Arcata
- Expansion of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) - the collection of data on the homeless
- Coordination of the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program
- Expansion of the Arcata House Partnership

By designating the HHHC a CoC, Humboldt County is highly competitive for the largest single source of federal funding for homelessness issues from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants program established and administered by HUD, as well as many other federal, state, and private funding sources. Most of the federal and state funding for Humboldt County's homeless programs is given to non-profit providers based on plans and programs developed by the CoC. In 2013-2014 Humboldt County was awarded eight Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance renewal grants and one new grant for a total of \$677,981. Since the first grant 11 years ago, Humboldt agencies have received \$4.6 million in federal McKinney-Vento funding.

There are many aspects to the problem of homelessness. Solving the complex problems of homelessness requires prevention, emergency care, temporary shelter, rehousing, availability of housing, and support services. There are many dedicated government entities, private organizations, non-profits, businesses, faith-based groups and community members providing assistance to the homeless in Humboldt County. There is no countywide coordination between these various entities, and the problem of homelessness persists.

Focus Strategies Report

A report (Addendum: City of Eureka Homelessness Policy Paper) released in August, 2014 by Focus Strategies, a Sacramento-based consulting firm specializing in homelessness and hired by the City of Eureka for approximately \$80,000.00, points to the HHHC as the leader of most of the work being done to address homelessness in Humboldt County. The report goes on to recommend, “that the City, County, and HHHC work together to formalize a Homeless Outreach Team ...”. Supporting this recommendation, the Focus Strategies Report provides short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations that include:

- Targeted outreach, assessment, and help for the homeless who generate the largest number of police and other emergency calls
- Formalization of a Homeless Outreach Team created by the joint effort of the city, county, and HHHC
- A joint effort by the city, county, and HHHC to analyze and improve the data in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to better understand how program outcomes could be improved and the best use of funding

The report was created for and approved by the Eureka City Council, and has support of the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, the Eureka City Council and other city officials.

Recent History

Committed to the Focus Strategies recommendation of rapid rehousing, the City of Eureka and others have created a Four Step Plan: Operation Safe Trails, Operation Helping Hands, Operation Clean Sweep and Operation Final Stretch.

- **Operation Safe Trails**, targeting the removal of the criminal element from the homeless encampment in the greenbelt north of the Bayshore Mall in Eureka, was conducted on April 15, 2015 by the Eureka Police Department.
- **Operation Helping Hands**, organized by the Eureka Police Department, began on May 1, 2015. The Services Resource Fair, a planned weekly event behind the Bayshore Mall, connects 20 local service providers directly with the homeless.
- **Operation Clean Sweep** will move all homeless people in the Bayshore Mall encampment to a yet-to-be-determined designated area or areas as a temporary encampment aimed to complement the rapid rehousing model proposed by Focus Strategies.
- **Operation Home Stretch** involves the conversion of the Multiple Assistance Center (MAC) into a transitional housing facility for about 100 homeless individuals, connecting them with mental health, substance abuse and housing services. Home Stretch calls for identifying and populating additional low-income housing to house the homeless and begin the rapid rehousing model. Also included in this final phase will be the evaluation of existing programs and, ultimately the closure of the designated temporary encampment(s).

The Four Step Plan is still taking shape with many key aspects to be worked out.

The development of the Four Step Plan included the City of Eureka, the Eureka Police Department, the Community Homeless Improvement Project (CHIP), DHHS and members of the business community. Contrary to one of the strongest recommendations of the Focus Strategies Report, the HHHC was not involved or consulted in the plan's creation.

METHODOLOGY

The Humboldt County Grand Jury:

- Interviewed various Humboldt County government officials, homeless service providers, and individuals from nonprofit organizations who deal with the issue of homelessness
- Studied the 2014 report from Focus Strategies
- Studied solutions from other states and comparable communities
- Reviewed HUD homeless assistance programs
- Studied solutions developed by various national and state organizations

- Researched California law (Government Code section 6500 et seq.) related to Joint Powers Authorities and the legalities and governance of housing trust funds

DISCUSSION

COORDINATED COUNTYWIDE APPROACH

National research has identified a centralized intake as an essential factor in the success of homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing programs. A centralized intake is defined as having the following components:

- Outreach to provide information so people will know where or how to access services
- A place to request assistance such as a walk-in center or call center
- A screening and assessment process to establish eligibility and housing and service needs
- Information about different programs and agencies that provide housing and services
- Referral services to get the person to the right agencies

HUD's Homeless Policy and Program Priorities include, "Removing Barriers to CoC Resources." One of the measures listed in the process of removing those barriers is

a centralized or coordinated assessment which is a key step in assessing the needs of the homeless requesting assistance and matching the needs of those households to the most appropriate housing and service options. The CoC Program interim rule requires the implementation of a centralized or coordinated assessment system.

The HudExchange website, which provides resources and information related to all HUD programs, posted the report, *Centralized Intake for Helping People Experiencing Homelessness: Overview, Community Profiles and Resources*, which lists the following benefits of a centralized intake:

For service seekers:

- Simplify and speed the process for people to locate and access needed services
- Help to ensure that people get the right services
- Save people time in looking for and traveling to service sites
- Provide access to multiple service programs through one process
- Be available 24/7

For prevention and homeless service providers:

- Maintain and provide a ready and certain source of appropriate client referrals
- Furnish immediate written information about the client's needs and requests
- Allow staff to focus on serving clients and less on gathering information
- Support interagency collaboration and coordination around a single intake process
- Improve cost efficiency by replacing duplicative intake functions with a single approach
- Reduce the effort needed and cost for agencies to publicize their services

For policy planners, decision-makers, and funders:

- Improve the speed, accuracy, and consistency of screening, assessment, and referral processes
- Make it possible to target resources more efficiently and accurately in order to be most effective (e.g., allow triaging to the most vulnerable people and/or urgent situations)
- Enhance the overall coordination of prevention and homeless services and reduce system-wide fragmentation
- Improve the system's ability to deliver accessible, culturally competent services, for example by providing information in multiple languages
- Create a pool of data about people seeking help and their housing and service needs, and about unmet needs and gaps in the service system

Centralized intake can enhance the quality of client screening and better target program assistance. As a result, the county's system for preventing and ending homelessness would be less fragmented and resources used more efficiently.

Joint Powers Authority (JPA)

One successful model of a coordinated intake, assessment and referral process is the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). From their website (Addendum: www.lahsa.org):

Established in 1993 by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the Los Angeles City Council, LAHSA is an independent, Joint Powers Authority, whose primary role is to coordinate the effective and efficient utilization of federal, state, county, and city funding in providing services to homeless people throughout Los Angeles City and County. Over 100 nonprofit partner agencies benefit from the funding, program design, assessment and technical assistance provided by LAHSA, the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. Members of the 10-member governing commission are selected by the County Board of Supervisors and the Mayor and City Council. The commission is empowered with making budgetary, funding, planning, and program policies and decisions.

A Joint Powers Authority (JPA) is an entity permitted under California state law, California

Government Code 6500 – 6537, where two or more public agencies (e.g. local governments) may jointly exercise any power common to all of them. JPAs may be used where a condition naturally transcends the boundaries of existing public agencies, to establish a joint approach to work on a common problem, fund a project, or act as a representative body for a specific activity. JPAs may exist between counties and cities, counties and counties or across state lines.

The structure of each Joint Powers Authority is unique. JPA governing boards can be given any of the powers inherent in all of the participating agencies. The authorizing agreement outlines the powers the new authority will be allowed to exercise. The term, membership, and standing orders of the board of the JPA must also be specified. The joint powers authority may employ staff and establish policies independent of its member agencies. Two of the most common methods to generate working capital for a JPA are: 1) create a revenue stream, and 2) issue a bond. Through California state law a JPA has the powerful ability to issue revenue bonds without the need for voter approval.

There are several JPAs already at work in Humboldt County. They are the Humboldt County Association of Governments, Humboldt Bay Fire, Humboldt Waste Management Authority, Redwood Coast Energy Authority, Hazardous Materials Response Authority, and the North Coast Schools Insurance Group.

With an eye on a common goal, JPAs allow their member agencies to deliver services more efficiently to their beneficiaries. By sharing resources and through the use of economies of scale, the member agencies – and their taxpayers – save time and money.

The lack of coordination between the City of Eureka and the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, as well as the lack of action by the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, was a common theme and source of frustration among those interviewed by the Humboldt County Grand Jury. The Focus Strategies report repeatedly recommends implementation of countywide solutions. The report also recommends the City of Eureka and Humboldt County work together in their efforts to assist the homeless.

The lack of coordination and organization has been seen, most recently, in the implementation of Eureka's Four Step Plan. Coastal Commission approval was not obtained before the public declaration of four possible encampment sites. The initial two week eviction notice given to the homeless in the Bayshore Mall encampment was withdrawn.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

A critical lack of affordable housing has been identified as a nationwide problem. In 2014 the United States Conference of Mayors released its annual report (Addendum: The United States Conference of Mayors Hunger and Homelessness Survey.) on a survey of hunger and homelessness in 25 cities. The report identified a lack of affordable housing as the leading cause of homelessness among families with children. The lack of affordable housing has led to high rent burdens (rents which absorb a high proportion of income), substandard housing, and overcrowding. These phenomena have not only forced many people to become homeless, but they also have put a large and growing number of people at risk of becoming homeless.

Concern for the lack of available affordable housing in Humboldt County is also a common theme among service providers, government agencies, and the homeless themselves. The Focus Strategies report states that “While the inventory of available housing has grown, it has not yet reached the scale needed to produce a sizeable reduction in the total homeless population.”

All efforts toward housing the homeless in Humboldt County are flawed by the critical lack of affordable homes. The final step in Eureka's Four Step Plan and the Multiple Assistance Center's newly formed 30 to 60 day program is to permanently house the homeless. The waiting lists for Section 8 and public housing are closed due to the lack of permanent housing. The lack of affordable housing was cited as a reason for the City of Eureka to rehire Focus Strategies to create a second report to evaluate and compile a list of available affordable homes in Eureka. The 2013 update to the Humboldt County 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness identifies increasing the availability of stable, affordable housing as a top priority.

As stated in the Humboldt County General Plan Housing Element, the County is committed to addressing the issue of the lack of affordable housing.

H-IM22. Homeless Humboldt Housing and Homeless Coalition. The County shall support continuation of the Humboldt Housing and Homeless Coalition, or its equivalent, in order to guide policy development and implementation of programs that address the needs of the homeless population throughout the entire county. The County shall work cooperatively with cities to address the housing needs of the homeless population for the county as a whole. Responsible Agency: Health and Human Services & Planning and Building Department. Timeframe: on-going.

Housing Trust Funds

To address the nationwide lack of low-income housing, forty states have established housing trust funds to provide consistent funding for financing the construction, acquisition, and preservation of affordable homes. Housing trust funds are distinct funds that receive revenues from private and on-going, dedicated sources of public funding such as taxes, fees or loan repayments. Due to their flexibility, housing trust funds can be designed to take advantage of local, unique opportunities and address specific needs that exist within a community. In California housing trust funds exist in Alameda, Napa, Sacramento, Santa Clara, and San Mateo counties.

All cities in San Mateo County and the County of San Mateo have formed a housing trust fund structured as a JPA. Established in 2003 the Housing Endowment And Regional Trust (HEART) coordinates financial resources of public and private sector entities that want to play a role in meeting the critical regional need for affordable housing. Collaboratively, HEART has the ability to pursue multiple strategies to access new funds for housing, leverage funds over the long term, and provide a secure funding source for ongoing affordable housing development and preservation. San Mateo County's model is widely recognized for its regional approach to address the availability of affordable housing.

The Focus Strategies report included the recommendation to the City of Eureka to “continue collaboration with HHHC to develop and implement countywide solutions.” The report noted:

The HHHC has developed an updated plan to end homelessness in Humboldt County that

strongly aligns with federal policy direction and focuses on expanding housing opportunities; expanding rapid rehousing capacity; expanding substance abuse treatment capacity; helping homeless people increase income; creating a coordinated intake, assessment and referral process; and using data to understand results. Elected officials and staff from the City of Eureka as well as Eureka-based service providers have been very involved in this process and Focus Strategies would advise continuing and strengthening this partnership.

The HHHC is identified as the lead organization for homeless issues by the Focus Strategies report and is the federally designated and federally funded Continuum of Care entity for Humboldt County. The Focus Strategies report identified the HHHC as having the experience and the member agencies that provide the most comprehensive services for the homeless in Humboldt County.

FINDINGS

- F1. All the current plans to deal with homelessness are flawed by the critical lack of affordable housing in Humboldt County.
- F2. A housing trust fund structured as a Joint Powers Authority will provide consistent funding for financing the construction, acquisition, and preservation of affordable housing that would mitigate the lack of affordable housing in Humboldt County.
- F3. Humboldt County lacks a countywide approach to homelessness that provides a centralized intake service and a coordinated distribution of housing and supportive services.
- F4. The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors and the Eureka City Council have not implemented a major recommendation of the Focus Strategies report to coordinate their efforts on behalf of the homeless.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Humboldt County Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors and the Eureka City Council form a housing trust fund structured as a Joint Powers Authority, which includes the current Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition and other county stakeholders to coordinate and administer Humboldt County's efforts to address and end homelessness. (F1, F2, F3, F4)

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Humboldt County Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

- 1) Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (R1)
- 2) City of Eureka City Council (R1)

INVITED RESPONSES

- 1) Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition (R1)

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