

# WISCONSIN....THE LONG WAY HOME

*A COMPARISON OF WISCONSIN'S EFFORT TO  
CONFRONT AND END HOMELESSNESS TO OUR  
MIDWESTERN NEIGHBORS.*

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WISCONSIN... THE LONG WAY HOME

*A comparison of the State of Wisconsin's effort to confront and end homelessness to our Mid-western neighbors.*

Wisconsin at one point was a national trendsetter in that it was one of the first States in the nation to allocate state funded resources to combat homelessness. In the mid 1980's the State Legislature allocated funds to support emergency shelters throughout the State, especially in urban areas. Though funding was not originally in then Governor Tony Earl's budget proposal, \$600,000 was added by the legislature and approved by the Governor. In the early 1990's, Governor Thompson learned of the statewide increase in rural and family homelessness and in response, increased the emergency shelter allocation to \$1.4 million per year and offered additional resources for transitional housing.

Since that time **no** additional State effort has been secured and the anecdotal sense of advocates and other professionals that work in the field is that Wisconsin has fallen far behind our neighboring mid-western states. This report is an attempt to quantify the support of homeless programs of our neighbors, specifically Minnesota, Illinois and Michigan. We are looking into the areas of general purpose revenue (GPR) allocations aimed at preventing, treating, and ending homelessness. In addition, this overview will include models of State sponsored coordination that is accomplished through strong partnerships with homeless prevention advocacy entities that address the complex factors that cause homelessness.

It is important to note that in determining the level of State effort in GPR allocation we are careful to include funding that was specifically aimed at programs and services for the homeless as opposed to broad anti-poverty programs such as food stamps, or general welfare benefits. Also excluded from consideration are matching funds used to capture Federal funding streams for homeless specific programs. In measuring the level of State sponsored coordination we looked at:

- Has the State established an Interagency Council for the Homeless?
- Is there cabinet representation in the Governor's Office?
- Is the Interagency Council for the Homeless regularly meeting?
- Is the effort resulting in a high level of coordination between State agencies and resources?
- And, have advocates for homeless programs been intrinsically involved in spurring the development of a vibrant and engaged state-wide coalition?

What follows is a narrative description by State of efforts in response to those questions.

### **Minnesota**

Efforts to eradicate homelessness in Minnesota stand out as leading the way among all Midwestern States. Minnesota shines in regards to its comprehensive plan to prevent homelessness, leaving Wisconsin's approach in the dust. Minnesota, like Wisconsin in the mid 1980's, allocated a trifling amount for the operation of emergency shelters throughout the State. However, given the urgency of the problem, Minnesota has increased the appropriation for emergency shelter and transitional housing to an annual amount of \$4.15 million. But, they have

gone much further; Minnesota allocates \$9.35 million annually for homeless prevention activities such as emergency rent and utility payments, furniture vouchers, and financial assistance to assist homeless residing in shelters and transitional housing to secure and maintain permanent housing. In addition, Minnesota shares \$7.35 million to provide supportive services to the homeless. Programs such as mental health case management, protective payee services, assistance with employment issues, etc. are just a few of the examples of supportive services funded by this allotment. For programs that impact Homeless and Runaway Youth, the State provides \$2.6 million to support shelters, transitional housing and supportive services. Using GPR dollars the State also provides, on an annual basis, \$2.6 million in rent assistance targeted to formally homeless individuals and families to assist in the maintenance of permanent housing. Critical to the need for statewide coordination, Minnesota provides \$375,000 for the operation and support of their Continuum of Care (a federally mandated jurisdictional entity needed to obtain Federal homeless assistance).

Perhaps most significantly, Minnesota provides \$12 million annually to produce supportive housing for the homeless and just recently, approved \$100 million in bonding to produce very low income housing, 70% of which must be supportive housing for the homeless. It is projected that this bonding effort will rehabilitate and/or build 5,000 housing units state-wide.

Minnesota has an active Interagency Council with three full time staff. The lead staff holds the position of State Director to Prevent and End Homelessness. The Council, with the full support of the Governor, is comprised of eleven Cabinet officials who meet on a quarterly basis. Each Cabinet member in turn, appoints 3-4 staff persons from their department to be part of various work groups. This effort has produced a statewide plan to end homelessness which can be found at [headinghomeminnesota.org](http://headinghomeminnesota.org). In addition to the plan, the Council has created measures and metrics for each plan segment and the responsible department, which tracks program implementation progress. Most importantly, there is a clear understanding by cabinet level officials and their staff of how housing instability is a major obstacle in their department achieving their mission and that addressing the issue of homeless must be part of the plan of action at the highest levels of State Government.

The Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless has been in existence since the early 1990's. The Coalition is an incorporated nonprofit with a 501(c)3 status. With an annual budget of \$450,000, the coalition employs an Executive Director, Lobbyist, Communications Director, Membership Director, Social Media Manager and numerous regional organizers. Nearly half of the coalition's income comes from foundations and the other half comes from membership dues. The coalition receives **no** support from government and provides no direct services. Clearly the coalition has been a major player at the State level and is credited by many as the major entity responsible for Minnesota's aggressive plan and actions to attack homelessness. It should be noted that the coalition has also taken on other poverty issues at the State level which impact on homelessness; most recently advocating and securing reform of the TANF program.

## **Illinois**

Our neighbor to the south, like Minnesota, has been able to provide a level of assistance and coordination which in recent years has also outpaced Wisconsin's effort.

In the area of providing operating support for emergency shelters and transitional housing, Illinois has provided an annual appropriation of \$9.4 million. In addition, Illinois provides \$4 million for homeless prevention services annually. In order to spur the growth and development of supportive permanent housing for the homeless, Illinois established a fund to sustain supportive services when linked with a permanent supportive housing project. That fund receives an annual allocation of \$34.4 million dollars. Finally, Illinois allocates \$5.6 million annually to provide support for homeless youth and runaway programs throughout the state.

Illinois does have an interagency council in place, but it came together only recently as part of a federal SAMSHA grant application around mental health services for the chronically homeless. Advocates report that an interagency council only exists on paper and has not been active for several years. This has greatly inhibited State government efforts to coordinate homeless information and activities when compared to Minnesota.

Illinois has an active and vibrant state wide coalition for the homeless. Founded in 1980, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless began operations in the City of Chicago as an advocacy and organizing entity on behalf of the homeless. Over time, the organization has expanded its mission to include the whole state. Unique to the Midwest is the coalition's emphasis on organizing homeless people as a political force to engage in policy advocacy on issues that most affect them.

Currently, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless has an annual budget of \$2.1 million and a staff of 27. The activities of the coalition include community organizing, advocacy and public policy as well as the Law Project. While the coalition does not accept government support, it does provide casework through the Law Project which works on civil areas impacting the homeless. Currently the coalition has seven staff working in the organizing area, four in advocacy and public policy and four Law Project attorneys. Funding for the coalition is comprised of membership dues, both individual and organizational, as well as grants from foundations and corporations.

## **Michigan**

The State of Michigan currently allocates \$8.4 million annually to support the operational needs of emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities. In addition, the State provides \$1 million for supportive services for the homeless and also provides \$7 million for shelters and other services for runaway and homeless youth. Finally, Michigan provides \$250,000 for Continuum of Care operational support, primarily in the area of Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS).

Michigan, for many years had an organized interagency council which met consistently but the involvement of state staff focuses on mid-level members of the departments. The analysis of both advocates and government officials is that the lack of higher level involvement impedes the ability of the Council to move a coordinated agenda around homelessness at the State level.

Recently, the Michigan Interagency Council has been invigorated with the passage of new legislation, supported by the Governor, which mandates that the Council be made up of cabinet level appointees. There is great hope that this new reconstituted Interagency Council will be able to mirror the success of the Council in Minnesota.

The Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness traces its origins back to 1990 when a group of advocates and providers sensed a need for an organization to provide advocacy and coordination around homeless issues on a statewide basis. Since that time the coalition has had impressive revenue growth, with a current budget of \$1.3 million. On the down side, much of that revenue is comprised of government contracts for operating the State HMIS system and for being the core state agency for the AmeriCorps program. By their own admission, reliance on State funding has greatly hampered their advocacy mission as the coalition has restraints on being critical to or about their largest funder-the State of Michigan.

### **Wisconsin**

For over 25 years, Wisconsin has supported emergency shelters and transitional housing programs with an annual appropriation of only \$1.4 million. The allocation has remained stagnant despite strong evidence that there has been a significant increase in homelessness. The State provides \$1.8 million annually for homeless prevention services and allocates a mere \$50,000 per annum to programs serving homeless and runaway youth.

In 2004, then Governor Doyle, through an Executive Order, established an Interagency Council for the Homeless. There was no mandate within the order to ensure the involvement of members of the Governor's Cabinet. Therefore State departments were represented by mid-level bureaucrats who did not possess decision-making or policy development authority. The Council met sporadically and did, to its credit, in 2007, develop a plan for ending homeless in Wisconsin. Despite good intentions, the plan was flawed in that it contained a series of broad goals with no metrics by which to measure progress, no recommendations about funding, and no assignment of tasks. It is no surprise that the plan never gained any traction. Even today, despite some considerable effort, it has been impossible to locate a copy of the plan.

The Interagency Council was essentially dormant from 2008 to 2015 and was only recently reconstituted by the administrator of the Division of Housing. It has met a few times, but unfortunately, like its predecessor, the Council membership is limited to lower level department staff.

It should be noted that the issue of Housing itself has never held a prominent place in Wisconsin State government. There is no "department" of housing and housing programs and activities are administered from a Division of Housing. That Division has been placed in various departments over the years and currently resides in one of the States broadest reaching branches, the Department of Administration. Homeless services and programs within the Division of Housing are placed in the Bureau of Special Needs Housing. The Bureau does not have a lead administrator and has become simply a grant program administrative pass-through for homeless programs. The lack of attention to the needs of the homeless at the State level was punctuated recently, when the Bureau relinquished the administration of the Statewide HMIS system (an

essential tool in determining the full picture of who are and how many homeless people are in the State) to one of the CoC's in Wisconsin. The administrative "shift" of this tool is indicative of the lack of interest and investment in homelessness by the State of Wisconsin.

There have been two attempts to establish a statewide coalition for the homeless in Wisconsin. The first being in the early 1990's and the second attempt to develop a coalition was initiated in 2009. Neither of these efforts took hold and Wisconsin has never had a coordinated statewide voice for advocacy on homelessness and issues that affect the homeless. The newly founded Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness, which is the sponsor of this paper, now hopes to become that advocate voice.

## **Conclusion**

It is more than apparent that Wisconsin has fallen far behind its neighboring States in its efforts to end homelessness. The State of Minnesota spends over \$38 million annually for services directed at the homeless. Similarly Illinois allocates \$53 million and Michigan \$16 million. In the areas of funding, coordination, and advocacy there is a lot of ground that has to be covered. So one has to ask the question; "Why has Wisconsin, which was so quick to initially respond to the issue of homelessness in the 1980's, fallen so far behind?"

The answer seems to be that Wisconsin has always lacked a statewide coalition for the homeless, which was privately funded, and focused on advocacy. The reality is that the lack of progress at the State level cannot be laid at the feet of one political party or one Governor, as the inaction spans the administrations of both Republicans and Democrats and multiple State leaders. We advocates need to ask ourselves the following:

- When have homeless advocates and providers been engaged in the State budget process?
- Who works consistently to meet with legislators on this issue?
- What entity takes the time to coordinate a letter writing campaign to the Governor or key legislators about the needs of the homeless?

The reality is that if we are not at the table no one is going to hear us. If we are not at the table speaking for homeless people, then no one is.

Further it is becoming increasingly clear that funding decisions by the Federal government are being made in part on the basis of whether the State government is a partner in funding and coordinating homeless activities. It is evident in many of the recent funding decisions by HUD that Wisconsin is at a clear disadvantage to other States when it comes to obtaining successful Federal homeless awards.

Unlike other neighboring states, who are far ahead of us, advocates in Wisconsin have become so involved in the daily grind of operating programs that there has been little, if any energy to provide a voice for the homeless at the State level. In essence we have no one else to blame, but ourselves. The sub-title of this paper is "A comparison of the State of Wisconsin's effort to confront and end homelessness to our Mid-western neighbors". The historical scan of past actions indicate that the State of Wisconsin has not confronted the complex factors that cause

individuals and families to be homeless, nor has it taken the necessary efforts to end homelessness.

\*UPDATE: The State of Minnesota in its recent budget increased its homeless funding to \$44 million annually.