

WISCONSIN COALITION AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

THE WISCONSIN HOPE ACT

Ending Homelessness in Wisconsin

A Discussion Paper

INTRODUCTION

Despite best efforts on the part of a variety of administrations and strategic methods that advocate for and implement the latest homelessness prevention model, it never seems to be enough. Enhancing supportive services, utilizing a rapid re-housing approach, or promoting the Housing First model may bring about time limited success, but in the end, individuals and families often, due to a variety of factors, becoming homeless again. Immediate shelter needs can provide a roof over one's head – hence the value of Housing First or rapid re-housing. Behavioral issues also endanger long-term housing stability; that is the role of supportive services. But – in the end, it is financial literacy coupled with a consistent, family supporting income that will maintain housing stability and mitigate circumstances that pull people back into homelessness. According to the State Homeless Management Information System only 34.21 % of non-disabled adults entering the homeless service system in Wisconsin are employed and that number increases only marginally to 37.24% upon exit from the system. (Please see the full employment report attached)

All the services above are necessary to reduce homelessness – but those efforts need to have a tie that binds the whole approach together, and that tie is employment. For work able individuals, increasing their personal experiences and values associated with decent employment; preparing them for the current job market; providing appropriate supports so that they can focus on and keep their jobs, as well as developing an understanding of basic personal finances and budgeting, will keep them out of the homeless system. Employment and money management is the “bookend” to all the upfront supports and services in place. **This paper postulates that the main pillars of Wisconsin's strategy to end homelessness should be prevention, affordable housing with appropriate supporting services, and employment with needed service supports. (For example, supportive employment opportunities)**

For 20 years human service advocates and affordable housing advocates have endeavored to create an integrated model to move their clients through a chain of services and supports. This effort has been both laborious and complicated! Human service providers had to move out of their area of expertise, learning new lexicons about the production of affordable housing. Meanwhile it became incumbent on those on the development end to learn about how to produce a quality shelter product that includes a comprehensive service support system.

These efforts have resulted in the creation and advocacy of strategies such as supportive housing, rapid rehousing and Housing First. However, let us consider the following scenario:

If today, we had the resources to provide shelter to every homeless individual and family in the State of Wisconsin would homelessness be eliminated?

The answer would be a *qualified YES* in that Wisconsin would achieve the HUD defined fanciful paradigm of functional zero. However, if individuals and families time out of their short-term rent subsidies, or they are unable to financially support themselves, or they make decisions that impede their ability to pay their landlords, they run a high risk of once again becoming homeless.

Low-income people often have the cards stacked against them. A family cannot economically survive on W-2 supports and individuals cannot survive on sporadic, temporary day labor. Efforts to move non-disabled persons and families from the streets to permanent housing is really nothing more than a short term solution if that strategy does not involve employment. Without a wage income to pay the rent, rapid rehousing and Housing First programs become a complicated and elongated emergency shelter stay.

Traditionally, homeless advocates have not integrated employment strategies into the quest for ending homelessness. Why not? There are some obvious reasons:

- First, the focus has been on persons with disabilities because of the HUD mandated focus on the chronically homeless and the circumstances that