

2012 Okanogan County's Three Year Plan to reduce Homelessness

Submitted to Okanogan County Board of Commissioners for Approval Sept 25,2012

Preamble **PREAMBLE**

Counties throughout the state were assigned the task of strategizing how to reduce Homelessness by 50% in Ten Years, beginning in 2005 through legislation loosely known as 2163 or the Homeless Housing Assistance Act

Four Demographic Categories were addressed, Homeless Families, Chronic Homeless, Non Chronic Homeless and Youth. Additionally, Recommendation to the legislature were to be provided

Each of these Categories required short and long term strategies in four areas: Prevention, Housing, Income, and Health

Results

Our first plan was drafted in December 2005 and approved subject to a fully developed plan which addressed all required areas in August 2006. Since that time, the Ten Year Plan has undergone some amendments, but using it has proved to be unwieldy and out of touch with the current availability of funding in light of the economic downturn. The Housing Coalition Partners met on May 17th, 2010 to review the plan item by item and have prepared the following draft which attempts to avoid duplication of effort, to efficiently utilize resources, and to build much needed infrastructure as has been one of the Coalition Goals since its inception. Through Collaboration, we can accomplish much. This has been demonstrated through the new facility in Omak built by OBHC in partnership with Coalition members such as OCCAC, the Support Center, and Housing Authority of Okanogan County. More recently the Pine Meadows Senior Housing Project - a collaboration between the Housing

Authority of Okanogan County and OCCAC has entered the construction phase. (with support from OBHC on the Pine Meadows Senior Housing Board of Directors) OCCAC is currently planning development of more affordable housing and the purchase of property to accomplish this. Funding will be a key issue and rely on more community support than ever before.

Comments

PREVENTION

Preventing individuals from losing housing requires multiple strategies. In Okanogan County, the Housing Coalition utilizes communication between social service providers to prevent eviction, mortgage foreclosure/rescue, and family break down as much as possible. This is often subject to the availability of funding for the particular client at that point in time. With Budget cutbacks OCCAC is strategizing to engage new volunteers trained in the Circles Program to help facilitate transitions to successful behavior and outcomes

Short Term Strategies

All demographic categories other than unaccompanied youth are eligible for some kind of prevention assistance depending on the point in time of the funding entity.

The Short Term Strategies for adults and families will be to continue utilization of county

homelessness recording fee funds, THOR, the new Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG), & any supplemental funding such as LIHEAP, or HPRP (Homelessness Prevention and rapid rehousing (Simulus one time funding)

Continuing Case Management/Family Development via OCCAC Client Services provides the cornerstone of prevention.

Obstacles

Shortages of Affordable Housing

Shortages of Funding

Lack of Community Understanding about life in poverty

Challenges

Youth who are unaccompanied by a parental guardian have no where to turn for independent housing in Okanogan County. A proposal has been suggested to allow for a graduated emancipation which would then allow providers to assist in acquiring housing. The proposal requires a legislative champion

PREVENTION (continued)

Long Term Strategies

Beginning with the end in mind requires understanding how individuals become homeless. One of the key

factors identified is almost always a lack of financial literacy. By continuing the OCCAC Bounce Back classes, we are able to provide the education necessary to manage finite resources and introduce the concept of saving for a rainy day and growing assets through tools such as the earned income credit and free tax preparation. Providing a personally controlled safety net is a huge step in prevention that goes beyond reliance on outside funding continuation.

Development of better systems to connect families to system benefits such as unemployment compensation etc may help alleviate some of the pressures that lead to homelessness. Mortgage rescue assistance is an example of this. Finding the funding for counseling both from a case management and legal assistance standpoint will also help reduce crisis leading to homelessness

Development of Youth housing of some sort remains a goal, but is without support due to legalities of such a project

The most recent development in efforts to reduce homelessness has been engagement by OCCAC in the Bridges out of poverty program and the circles program that enhances it. This will require continued collaboration of all parties and the inclusion of more activity from more passive partners such as DSHS, faith based organizations, and the legal community - to name a few. This system CHANGES THE CONVERSATION ABOUT POVERTY and in turn changes the conversation about Homelessness. Make no mistake - most of our homeless neighbors ARE working. Affordable housing and lack of skills coupled with ethos accepted in generational poverty environments are the key limitations in secure housing for families that have experienced homelessness repeatedly. The "new homeless" - folks who have recently been taken down financially by the recession, are in a stronger position to capitalize on Rapid Rehousing programs - if they are able to find work.

At the review meeting of this draft a proposal was developed and with commissioner approval will be pursued in 2013 (or sooner) to establish a youth "drop in" center program that will provide basic care in terms of a warm place to be and receive meals as well as mentoring and assistance in navigating the system.

OCCAC has also stipulated increasing Housing for Veterans as a goal in their strategic plan over the next three years.