

The State of Family Homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia

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Summary

This series of fact sheets shed light on the serious problem of family homelessness in Virginia and the strategies that communities are using to end it. This overview draws from examples across the Commonwealth in urban, suburban and rural settings.

Homelessness is grossly misunderstood. When asking the average person about homelessness they most often picture a single man living on the streets of an urban downtown area with an empty bottle by his side. However, the fact of the matter is that 42 percent of those who experience homelessness in Virginia are persons in families¹ and communities report that families are the fastest growing population among those who experience homelessness.



The deteriorating economy has led more Virginians to the brink of homelessness than ever before, yet it has also sparked an unprecedented opportunity. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 created the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP), which will provide \$25 million to communities across Virginia to combat homelessness and prevent it from occurring in the first place. These funds offer communities the possibility of reducing rates of new homelessness, experimenting with new evidence-based approaches to ending homelessness, and preventing homelessness from occurring in the first place.

The approach to ending homelessness is changing as communities incorporate new strategies designed to prevent increases in homelessness and as prevention efforts increase in their importance. This study found the following components are critical to the success of any comprehensive community-based initiative to prevent and end homelessness:

- Community planning
- Local, regional and statewide collaboration
- Improved data collection
- Outcome-oriented flexible funds for both prevention and homelessness assistance programs
- Refinement of housing-focused strategies such as rapid re-housing

The Results

The results of the study are summarized in a series of fact sheets:

1. Family Homelessness in Virginia: Understanding the Extent
2. Affordable Housing and Family Homelessness
3. Family Homelessness in Virginia: Stories from the Commonwealth
4. Homelessness, Housing and Foster Care Involvement
5. Virginia's Local Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness
6. The Role of Collaboration in Ending Family Homelessness

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To supplement this data, two conference calls were held with service providers to solicit additional information on family homelessness in rural Virginia. Additionally, phone conversations and interviews were conducted both in follow up to the regional dialogues and to gain input from those who had not participated in the regional meetings.

Conclusion

This series of fact sheets is the start to a fuller understanding of the extent and scope of homelessness in Virginia. There are many more stories to share from the families who experience homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, the children who are placed in foster care due to a family's lack of housing, and the organizations and agencies who are dedicated to addressing this devastating problem across the state. These stories illustrate the scope and extent of the individual and societal impact of this problem better than any set of statistics ever could.

This project is not intended to answer every question about family homelessness in Virginia. On the contrary, it is designed to provoke discussion and further research to better understand the causes of family homelessness in Virginia and encourage investment in its solutions.

The data set is a sample drawn from specific communities, thus not every person and organization in Virginia was consulted. This project is unable to offer definitive information on the characteristics of all families experiencing homelessness in all areas of Virginia, as comparable data from every jurisdiction is unavailable. However, it is a valuable and necessary first cut at understanding the issue of homelessness and the strategies that have shown success.

Those consulted for this project—the people on the front lines assisting families who experience homelessness and the people who develop programs and policies—are valuable guides to understanding the complexity of the issue. Virginia is a geographically diverse state and the experiences of those from all regions of the Commonwealth were included.

This project outlines the policy and program changes that must be implemented to improve community efforts to prevent and end homelessness. VCEH's future initiatives will pursue these policy and program changes. One recommendation from this study is to refine data collection and develop public education programs on the causes of and solutions to homelessness. Data and research are crucial to demonstrating that there are solutions to homelessness. Many service providers share stories of an incredibly supportive public that donates food and clothing, but also has little understanding of the true causes of and solutions to homelessness—such as an inability to afford housing. As John McDowell of the Interfaith Hospitality Network of Roanoke said “We need to integrate policy initiatives with the actual experiences of homelessness, not just public perceptions, which are often misguided.”

Authors

The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness prepared this study and series of fact sheets. The primary authors are Phyllis Chamberlain and Teresa Taylor.

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Most importantly, we acknowledge the unwavering fortitude of the families who experience and are at risk of homelessness across the Commonwealth. We endeavor to help you end your struggle. ■