

To: U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Families with Children Work Group
From: Phyllis Chamberlain, Executive Director, Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness
Date: February 17, 2010
Re: Suggestions and Recommendations for Federal Strategic Plan on Homelessness

Suggested Strategies for Preventing and Ending Homelessness

The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH) is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia through community collaboration, capacity building, education and advocacy.

VCEH has prioritized the following best practices to prevent and end homelessness among families in Virginia.

1. Prioritizing permanent housing for families who are at risk of losing their children to the foster care system or who can be reunified with their children once the family is stably housed
2. Preventing homelessness for youth aging out of foster care
3. Preventing homelessness before it occurs
4. Assisting communities to begin or refine rapid re-housing programs
5. Building the capacity of communities to better respond to homelessness

Summary of Best Practices and Barriers to Best Practices

1. Barrier: Service providers and community planners have to string together too many funding sources with strict requirements; funding sources often do not work well together nor meet community need.

Solution / Recommendation: Provide flexible funds tied to strong outcome measures. For example, require that at least 80 percent of families served must be stably housed within one year. This will enable service providers the flexibility to address the wide range of client needs and achieve better outcomes for clients.

2. Barrier: Some service providers, especially in non-urban and rural areas, lack access to information and research and therefore have less knowledge of best practices.

Solution / Recommendation: Continue to provide concrete examples of best practices on accomplishments and successes of communities across the country. Detailed information, complete with facts and figures, will provide communities with the tools they need to understand why and how they might replicate the best practice.

These examples should encompass (a) a range of communities of diverse sizes and political realities; (b) best practices that are proven effective by research; and (c) a "how to" section describing *how* the best practice was implemented. People need help on *how* to make change and not just *what* to change.

Solution / Recommendation: Encourage local, state and federal funds for community planning and / or ten year plans to end homelessness.

Community discussion, buy-in, and input is critical to both prepare communities for new funding and program opportunities and help them obtain necessary political and community will. For example, communities with existing ten year plans and / or other types of community planning processes were much better prepared for the advent of HPRP funds than other communities.

3. Barrier: Service providers often have limited or no experience with a best practice strategy and do not, therefore, want to implement it.

Solution / Recommendation: Provide some funds for new and best practice strategies on a formula basis to ensure that every locality has access.

A formula distribution method often spreads funds thin. However, it is essential that localities have funds to “experiment” with approaches to homeless prevention and assistance that may be new to them such as rapid re-housing.

Areas where the federal government has been effective _____

1. Creating state and local ten year plans and state interagency councils on homelessness and encouraging more active participation from local and state government.
2. Generating media attention (which builds political and community will) on the issue of homelessness.
3. Setting the direction for the community response to homelessness in part by providing funding for certain purposes.
4. Providing critical funding - in the form of the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) - at a time when state and local and nonprofit budgets for homelessness and housing initiatives are depleted.

Suggestions for Improving Federal Government Response and Approach _____

Solution / Recommendation: Expand access to affordable housing by providing housing subsidies through the section 8 housing choice voucher program and family unification program.

Solution / Recommendation: Create set-asides and encourage incentives for federal, state and local agencies to set aside resources targeted to the homeless population and collaborate in a more substantive way at all levels of government.

Specifically, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) could encourage public housing agencies to target vouchers to homeless populations. Another specific recommendation is to encourage all federal agencies, including those who have not been as involved as HUD such as HHS and the VA, to streamline their homeless assistance and prevention programs to prioritize activities that enable clients to rapidly access permanent housing.

Organizations at the local and state level work hard to build relationships with local and state agencies and are often successful at developing partnerships that are mutually beneficial. But at the same time, building these partnerships is sometimes difficult and often takes a lot of effort. The federal government plays a strong role in directing how state and local agencies direct their resources.

Solution / Recommendation: Move beyond the creation of state ten year plans and ICHs to encourage states and localities to adopt the implementation goals of “reduce child homelessness” and / or “reduce length of stay in shelters and more rapidly re-house families”

Local and state ten year plans have been critical instruments in creating momentum and building community and political will. While many ten year plans are still in the process of creation, many communities are now moving towards implementation.

Solution / Recommendation: Review the status and efficacy of state and local ten year plans and state interagency councils on homelessness (ICHs) and their focus on strategies to prevent and end family homelessness.