

Knoxville's Plan to Address Homelessness
Progress Report
February 15, 2018

The City of Knoxville and its community partners are continuing the difficult work of implementing *Knoxville's Plan to Address Homelessness*. At the heart of that plan is the basic idea that homelessness is not an acceptable circumstance for anyone in our community. That idea compels us to work together not only to meet immediate, basic needs, but to do the things necessary to prevent homelessness when possible, and for those who do experience homelessness, to help them find the permanent housing and resources needed to re-establish a more stable living situation.

The causes of homelessness are varied and complicated, and there is no single profile that could accurately describe the people who experience the crises in their lives that result in having no permanent place to call home. As a result, our community's response to this issue is also varied and complicated and must be responsive to the different needs of each individual and family.

According to data in the Knoxville Homeless Management Information System (KnoxHMIS), in the last quarter of 2017, there were 2,976 people in Knoxville who were known to be literally homeless at some point during that quarter. Emergency shelter beds ranged generally from 80% to 91% full. Program-supported permanent housing stayed at 98% to 100% occupancy. Some of the primary self-reported causes of homelessness included behavioral and physical health problems, eviction, lack of affordable housing, job loss, and domestic violence. Permanent housing placements included 14 families, 33 veterans, and 57 people who met the definition of "chronically homeless." Rapid rehousing programs were reporting around nine days for housing placements, and average recorded length of stay for people in permanent housing programs was 2.9 years. Preliminary data indicates that since last year, there has actually been a slight decrease in the overall number of people experiencing homelessness in Knoxville.

The City of Knoxville commits almost \$1 million annually toward efforts to deliver services to help individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness – or those at risk of becoming homeless. This investment leverages millions of additional dollars in direct services that are provided by nonprofit partners throughout our community. The demand for resources nonetheless exceed supply, and so it is imperative that everyone works together to pursue shared goals to prevent, reduce and end homelessness.

In *Knoxville's Plan to Address Homelessness*, those shared goals are grouped together in five overlapping categories. This report offers a summary of some of the recent accomplishments and challenges, grouped in those five areas. This is not an exhaustive listing, however, as there is an enormous amount of work done in the Knoxville community to help those most in need.

I. Leadership, Collaboration and Civic Engagement

The Mayor's Roundtable on Homelessness continues to meet on a quarterly basis, with Mayor Madeline Rogero presiding. The purpose of the Roundtable is to bring together the leadership of social service organizations that focus on homelessness in order to collectively pursue the goals of the homelessness plan, and to be accountable to one another, the people we serve, and the community as a whole. The agenda for each Roundtable meeting is set to focus on current issues and initiatives.

The City of Knoxville's Office on Homelessness (OOH), staffed by Michael Dunthorn, supports the work of the Mayor's Roundtable and the implementation of *Knoxville's Plan to Address Homelessness*. The OOH also works with partner agencies and organizations to support coordinated efforts, and also provides

staff support to the Knoxville-Knox County Coalition for the Homeless. In cooperation with that organization the OOH serves as the “Collaborative Applicant” and coordinates Knoxville’s annual application to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for funding for homeless services and housing, through the “Continuum of Care” (CoC) program. In 2017, Knoxville applied for and received \$1,373,859 in CoC funding to continue operation of programs and housing at seven different agencies. While the OOH coordinates the application process, this funding goes directly from HUD to each agency.

Also in cooperation with the Homeless Coalition, Michael Dunthorn with the OOH acted as host for the third “Landlord Summit,” which is an event designed to gather together landlords - particularly those that offer affordable housing options - and provide them with useful information on things such as social services, the Housing Choice Voucher program, weatherization programs, and legal issues under fair housing laws and the landlord-tenant act. OOH and the Homeless Coalition use this opportunity to build relationships with landlords in order to increase the availability of affordable housing options for those who need them, and to provide landlords with needed information and access to resources to successfully operate their business while providing that much-needed housing.

The OOH also works with the Homeless Coalition on other efforts, including youth homelessness, family homelessness, and the creation of a new “Coordinated Entry System” (CES). The CES will establish a standardized intake, assessment and referral process for people experiencing homelessness. The goal of CES will be to quickly refer each individual or family to the most appropriate organization to assist with services and housing placement, and also to assess which individuals or families are the most vulnerable, and prioritize them by that need for placement in programs and housing. CES is a new requirement for agencies receiving funding from HUD, but it is also a good idea and a best practice to assure that those with the greatest need are served appropriately and as quickly as possible. Through the OOH, the City has provided funding to support a CES coordinator position at the University of Tennessee’s Social Work Office of Research and Public Service (SWORPS), to operate in conjunction with the Knoxville Homeless Management Information System (KnoxHMIS).

The OOH also works to communicate directly with individuals and groups in the community about the issue of homelessness, its impact on the community as a whole, and how best to work together to most effectively address the needs of those experiencing homelessness, while helping them to find their way back into permanent housing and more stable living in Knoxville.

In 2017 and 2018, Michael Dunthorn has also served as the chair of the Tennessee Interagency Council on Homelessness, an organization established on the state level by Governor Haslam’s administration. The state ICH is supported by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and brings together state agency representatives along with local representatives to set the state’s agenda on this issue and to support local initiatives like Knoxville’s *Plan*.

The Knoxville Homeless Management Information System (KnoxHMIS) provides key support to the Office on Homelessness, the Homeless Coalition and to community partners. Operated by the UT Social Work Office of Research and Public Service, HMIS is a secure database that keeps track of local homeless service resources as well as each individual interacting with the agencies providing those resources. KnoxHMIS partners with nineteen different agencies and organizations to gather, coordinate and report information on homelessness in Knoxville and Knox County, Tennessee. While the information on each individual or family recorded in HMIS is kept secure, the aggregate information is extremely useful in understanding our community’s successes and ongoing challenges in addressing the issue of homelessness.

In addition to providing annual reports based on the information gathered, to provide agency partners, City leadership and the general public with clear information on this issue, KnoxHMIS has created a user-friendly online “Dashboard Report” that is updated quarterly, reporting key indicators on the outcomes of services, shelter and housing provided to people at-risk or experiencing homelessness in our community. Although Homeless Management Information Systems are operated in communities across the country, the highly accessible online dashboard report is a first-of-its-kind best practice that has already served as a model for a number of other states and communities. The Dashboard and other reports can be found at www.knoxhmis.org.

II. Improve the Crisis Response System

Historically, much of the response to homelessness here and elsewhere has primarily been through crisis response activities, providing food and shelter and other short-term assistance to people and families faced with homelessness. While those immediate needs unquestionably must be met, that simply can't be the community's only response. Providing only crisis responses to chronic problems ultimately will end up being inefficient and ineffective. Improving crisis response then must involve not only meeting immediate needs, but quickly helping people move on to resources and housing that will end homelessness as well as needs for emergency help.

Preventing homelessness is the first step in improving crisis response. Averting a crisis altogether is ideal. The OOH is continuing its support of CAC case management at four public housing locations that serve the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Residents at these locations who, for various reasons, are at risk of being evicted, are first referred to CAC social workers. These case managers then work with each referred resident to address the issue that would otherwise cause them to be evicted. Whether the issue is making sure that the resident's rent is being paid on time, decluttering an apartment, or resolving some other issue, case managers are highly successful at helping the resident clear up the issue, avoid eviction and remain housed.

As mentioned in the first section, a new “Coordinated Entry System” (CES) has been under development, and with funding from the City of Knoxville, will begin implementation in 2018. CES will greatly enhance the way people experience the system of services in Knoxville, and will assure more consistent and more rapid referrals to the most appropriate resources and housing, and will also provide greater assurance that those with the greatest need will be prioritized. By coordinating and consolidating referrals and wait-lists, CES will also have a secondary effect of improving our understanding of community need for specific types of resources and housing. This information will improve future decision making regarding where to best allocate resources to meet identified needs. Finally, CES will improve the crisis response system by more efficiently and quickly moving people out of crisis mode and into housing placements and more stable living.

In the past year, although the overall number of people experiencing homelessness in Knoxville has not increased, there has been a more visible and concerning unsheltered homelessness situation, particularly in the area of the intersection of Broadway and Magnolia Avenue. The highly visible population there has drawn attention to some of the most challenging issues in addressing homelessness.

Broadly speaking, there are significant issues that contribute to homelessness, and ultimately to the unsheltered population that is seen in that area. There is not enough affordable housing available to meet the needs of low-income people. There are many organizations in Knoxville that work very hard to help individuals and families find permanent, affordable housing, and they do so successfully every day. Nonetheless, the demand for affordable housing exceeds the supply. Many people who are on track to find housing are less visible, however, staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, in

hotel and motel rooms, in cars or even temporarily ‘doubled up’ with family or friends. A smaller portion of the population, however, can be found staying literally out on the streets.

Even with the challenges of finding affordable permanent housing, there is almost always additional capacity in emergency shelters, including at Knox Area Rescue Ministries. Referencing data in the KnoxHMIS Community Dashboard Report, there is generally between ten and twenty percent available capacity in emergency shelter. There are a number of different reasons why, even with some shelter capacity available, there are people who are staying outside. In some cases, there are behavioral issues that prevent access to the shelter. People are not allowed to actively use drugs or alcohol in the shelter, and of course people are not allowed to act violently toward shelter staff or other shelter residents. Because of certain mental conditions, there are some individuals who find going inside to be difficult, or they struggle to cope with crowded situations. Some say they don’t want to deal with the rules, and managing a shelter for several hundred people each night does require some rules to maintain basic order. Some have more belongings than the shelter is able to store during an overnight stay. Legal restrictions prevent individuals on the sex offender registry from accessing the shelter. Finally, KARM has recently begun requiring that shelter residents who are mentally able to do so to engage in programming and resources that will help with employment, housing placement, addiction treatment, etc., in order to continue to stay in the shelter. Individuals who are able, but refuse to engage with these resources will eventually be given a limit on how long they can continue to use the overnight shelter without using resources to work towards housing, employment, and a more stable living situation.

Also, the opiate crisis that is felt nationwide is having an impact here, and addictions are causing some people to end up on the streets and unable or unwilling to engage with available shelter and social service resources.

As part of a mid-year budget amendment, City Council approved allocating \$500,000 to address homelessness, particularly the pressing concerns along Broadway. That funding is already going to support a new manager of the Coordinated Entry System, described above. The funding is also proposed to be used to fund additional street outreach case workers, to reinstate a successful pilot program that helped sex workers get off the streets and into better circumstances, to develop a communications plan to help the faith community and others connect with and support the coordinated work of the existing homeless service and housing agencies, and finally, in cooperation with the area’s providers, the establishment of a clean, controlled and monitored daytime *safe space* with a low bar for entry. The *safe space* would get people off of the sidewalks and safely separated from street drug dealers and other predators who do not need to be in the area. As of this report, these proposals are under development with implementation planned for early 2018.

As colder weather has come with the winter of 2017-18, there has been heightened concern regarding the unsheltered population, particularly in the Broadway area. It is important to understand that our community’s crisis response system does step up to provide access to shelter when the temperature drops below freezing.

Service providers implement a “white flag” cold-weather policy when temperatures drop below freezing. They unfurl a white flag to inform individuals experiencing homelessness that the policy is in place. The policy relaxes the rules for those who wish to come indoors and out of the elements.

During the cold weather, several providers operate under a white flag policy. At KARM’s shelters, this allows anyone to come in, with the exception of a small number of people who have been charged with criminal trespassing, which usually reflects that they have previously been violent toward someone else at the shelter.

KARM uses overflow space in its chapel for this purpose, and has also partnered with several area churches on the “Room at the Inn” program, so that if needed, people can get to these partner churches for shelter. KARM has not exceeded its capacity to provide shelter onsite so far during this year's cold weather events.

Another service provider in the white flag procedure, The Salvation Army, does not discharge people when they reach the end of a transitional program without establishing permanent housing. The Salvation Army also relaxes eligibility for others to enter into a program. If needed, there's a cooperative agreement with KARM to use the Salvation Army gymnasium as overflow space if KARM reaches capacity, but that has not been used in several years. The resource remains available.

Volunteer Ministry Center also participates in the white flag program during freezing weather, inviting anyone (except those with criminal trespass issues) to come inside during the daytime, regardless of eligibility or participation in VMC programming.

Social service providers and the Knoxville Police Department actively check on unsheltered people during cold weather events to make them aware of the white-flag policy and to encourage them to take shelter. Some individuals may choose not to take advantage of the shelter that is offered. Outreach to these individuals is repeated in hopes they can be encouraged to come inside.

The visible unsheltered population is not the only significant challenge to the crisis response system. There is not a sufficient supply of emergency and short-term shelter for homeless families in Knoxville. The Compassion Coalition and CAC have collaborated on a *Short Term Housing Program* for families, which provides funding for a family to stay in a motel room, if the family has case management support and a permanent housing plan in place and there are no shelter beds available.

Motel arrangements are comparatively expensive, however, and family shelter beds are not only limited, but not generally able to accommodate families with adolescent males or adult male fathers. Family shelter space is close quartered with multiple families, and safety and liability issues make it difficult to mix women and female children with adolescent and adult males. The need, then is for shelter space that can separately accommodate each family, regardless of which members and genders are present. The Mayor's Roundtable and partner agencies will be looking for other options to meet this critical need.

III. Create and Maintain Access to a Variety of Decent, Appropriate, Affordable Permanent Housing

The Office on Homelessness has continued to provide funding in support of operations of Permanent Supportive Housing at Minvilla Manor and Flenniken Landing. Both apartment buildings provide permanent residences for people who were chronically homeless prior to moving in, and offer onsite case management services for their residences. Minvilla has 57 apartment units, and Flenniken has 48.

The City's Community Development Department is in its first year of implementing a new \$2 million Affordable Housing Fund. This resource is available to help with the development of new units of affordable rental housing. As of the time of this report, the fund has committed support for the development of 12 added units of transitional housing at Restoration House, serving single mothers with children, and 12 new units of permanent supportive housing for military veterans that is being developed by the Helen Ross McNabb Center. Also under consideration is a proposal by Elmington Capital to develop 167 affordable apartment units that will provide housing for families with incomes of 60% or less of the Area Median Income.

Funded in part with Community Development Block Grant and HOME funds, Homesource of East Tennessee is constructing 38 units of affordable housing on Holston Drive for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Through Community Development and the Office on Homelessness, the City is working with various developers to identify additional opportunities to create additional affordable housing in the future.

Through the “Continuum of Care” program funded by HUD, the Salvation Army is shifting a significant part of its ‘Operation Bootstraps’ transition housing program to a new Transitional Housing/Rapid Re-housing model. The focus will be on helping people find appropriate, affordable housing as quickly as possible, with the transitional housing beds used to provide a short-term place to stay to fill the gap while the permanent housing placement is being worked out. This program structure is intended to keep the focus on permanent housing placement, while providing greater interim stability to assure a successful transition from the streets to permanent housing.

IV. Increase Economic Security

In 2017, the Sustainability Office of the City of Knoxville, in partnership with a number of community partners, concluded the Knoxville’s Extreme Energy Makeover (KEEM) initiative. KEEM was implemented by CAC, with support from the City of Knoxville, the Knoxville Utilities Board (KUB) and the Alliance to Save Energy. With \$15 million in funding from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), in less than two years, KEEM provided whole-home, direct-install energy upgrades to nearly 1,300 lower-income families, and educated more than 1,700 residents on how to take control of their utility bills through energy saving habits. KEEM was created partly in response to a desire to prevent homelessness caused by families’ inability to keep up with utility bills in energy-inefficient housing. Too often, people living in housing with affordable rent or mortgages find utilities unaffordable, and either need repeated help from utility assistance programs, or not only end up losing their housing, but then become homeless and struggle to obtain new housing because of lingering unpaid utility bills. KEEM thus served to prevent homelessness by correcting the underlying energy efficient problem.

As part of the same initiative, KUB began its “Round it Up” program, asking rate payers to round their bill payments up to the nearest dollar, with the difference going to fund an ongoing weatherization program. As of December 2017, the Round it Up program has raised \$2 million, spent \$1.8 million to weatherize 158 homes, and the rest committed to ongoing weatherization and energy efficiency upgrades, also administered by CAC.

Knoxville Leadership Foundation has begun implementation of its KnoxWorx program. KnoxWorx serves youth and adults in the Knoxville area by providing mentoring, job search strategies, and networking opportunities to help the unemployed gain meaningful employment. The program’s vision is to connect people to needed resources by engaging churches, employer partners, mentors and caring individuals to reach into the community and help those struggling with unemployment.

KARM has begun operation of its new Berea program, which is a course designed to combine work, learning, and community service in order to help program participants develop work and life skills necessary to regain a stable lifestyle after leaving the shelter. Participants work to help with shelter operations with a learning objective that promotes discipline, responsibility, initiative, and cooperation. The core Berea curriculum teaches a range of life skills including planning, collaboration, building relationships, and finance. In addition to the core curriculum, art, music, and other electives are offered and encouraged to enrich every aspect of a student’s life. Advanced career training in food and janitorial services can also be part of a student’s Berea course work. Berea students are expected to “give back” to their local community, and opportunities for community service are made available to every Berea

student. Churches and other local organizations provide important and fulfilling opportunities for Berea students as they learn that everyone has something to give and that everyone's service is important.

V. Improve Health and Stability

Knox County, with support from the State of Tennessee and the City of Knoxville, will be opening the new Behavioral Health Urgent Care Center in the spring of 2018. The BHUCC will operate a judicial diversion program for nonviolent individuals who struggle with mental illness and co-occurring disorders. Law enforcement will be able to take these individuals to the BHUCC when picked up for minor non-violent offenses. This facility will be open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year as an alternative to jail or emergency room placement. The Center will provide assessment, opportunity to begin treatment, 72 hours of safe and supportive care, discharge planning and case management for our community. Offering mental health, addiction and crisis services will help make an impact on jail recidivism, homelessness and personal recovery.

In cooperation with the UT Social Work Office of Social Work and Public Service, the Helen Ross McNabb Center will be implementing a three year, \$1.2 million dollar grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to serve approximately 90 families that are experiencing homelessness. The program will assist families in three ways: 1) by providing mental health and substance abuse services, 2) assisting families in obtaining other social services, benefits and resources for which they are eligible, and 3) assisting families to locate and obtain appropriate, affordable permanent housing. The program will offer integrated, trauma-informed services, with a focus on stabilizing families in permanent housing after placement.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this report, the information presented here is not meant to be a complete listing of everything that is being done to address homelessness in our community. The information here does, however, represent a broad spectrum of work underway to prevent, reduce and end homelessness here.

Homelessness is in many ways a symptom of other problems in social and economic systems. Knoxville is like every other city in the United States as we work to address the local impact of a national problem. Even as we make progress in changing how we respond to the issue by doing more to be proactive, and by applying more resources to longer-term solutions, this work is impacted by changes outside our control. Things like shifting federal government priorities and funding, changes to the economy, the healthcare system, the opiate crisis, and even natural disasters, like the massive fire in Sevier County at the end of 2016, can all impact what we see happening here.

While some communities are reporting that they have effectively "ended homelessness" among certain populations like veterans, others are reporting overwhelming spikes in homelessness. Here in Knoxville, while there is an increased visible unsheltered population, particularly just north of downtown, there has been an enormous amount of progress in ways that are less obvious. The overall number of people experiencing homelessness in Knoxville has actually decreased slightly since last year. *Housing First* does work, and even people who have spent years on the streets can change their lives with the help of permanent supportive housing. Emergency shelter and transitional housing resources are becoming more accountable as organizations like KARM are increasing their efforts to not just provide food and shelter, but to help the people who stay with them to get off the streets and live restored lives, and the Salvation Army shifts its focus to quicker placements into permanent housing.

We know that 2018 will bring with it new challenges, but the City of Knoxville remains committed, along with a group of dedicated community partners, to meet those challenges and find better ways to prevent, reduce and end homelessness in Knoxville.