

Home Again

*A 10-year plan to end homelessness in
Portland and Multnomah County*

Citizens Commission on Homelessness

December 2004

A Message of Hope

Despite the dedicated efforts of many, more people are homeless in Portland than ever before. If we as a community don't come up with a permanent solution to our city's homelessness problem, we risk having a permanent homeless population on our streets.

Last year, we convened the Citizens Commission on Homelessness to generate solutions to this challenge. Our charge to Commission members was simple: give us a plan to end homelessness in 10 years. This plan is the result of their hard work.

The Citizens Commission recommends changes to the way we combat homelessness that will produce effective and permanent results. These changes will require that local governments, social service agencies, nonprofit organizations, and institutions like hospitals and jails—all the partners in the homeless system—work together in innovative and more accountable ways.

This plan emphasizes immediate housing for chronically homeless people and a commitment to accountability for all homeless system partners. We want a system that tackles the problem of homelessness with housing and services that work, and we want those services delivered in the most coordinated, efficient manner possible.

This plan is the first step towards ending chronic cycles of homelessness forever. We hope you will join us in this very important effort.

Mayor Vera Katz

Mayor Elect Tom Potter

County Chair Diane Linn

Commissioner Erik Sten

Commissioner Serena Cruz

December, 2004

What needs to change?

It's widely accepted that the current homeless system, while it works well for some, is not doing enough to permanently end homelessness. Some people respond well to the system's design—which moves people from emergency shelters, to short-term shelters, to transitional housing, and then to permanent housing. For others, however, the system merely ferries people from service to service, and then back out onto the street. We need to get more people into housing and help them stay there.



Too much current spending on homelessness goes towards providing emergency services to homeless people, yet without ever getting them into permanent housing. Only about 30 percent of homeless individuals and families are currently placed into permanent housing after receiving services from our homeless system. Today's homeless system simply does not have the capacity to permanently house everyone who needs it. The result is a

cycle that leads many people into chronic or permanent homelessness.

A large population of homeless people is a symptom that our community is not healthy. It is not healthy for those who are homeless, and not healthy for the rest of us. The perception also exists among individual citizens, neighborhoods, and many in Portland's business community that homelessness is hurting the local economy. Many report that seeing chronically homeless people on the streets is disturbing or frightening to customers and tourists. The end to chronic homelessness needs to be one of our top priorities as a community.

* *Housing First Works*

Last year JOIN—an organization dedicated to helping homeless people move into permanent housing—moved 436 homeless people off the street and into permanent housing. After a year, nearly 90 percent remained in this permanent housing

Making the homeless system work better

To move from the institutionalization of homelessness, the institutions that serve homelessness must change.

Rather than shuffling homeless people from service to service and back to the street, the aim of all government agencies, nonprofits, and institutions in the homeless system must be to first get homeless people into permanent housing.

This 10-year plan is built on three principles:

1. Focus on the most chronically homeless populations.
2. Streamline access to existing services in order to prevent and reduce other homelessness.
3. Concentrate resources on programs that offer measurable results.

These principles emphasize a “housing first” methodology for ending chronic homelessness and focus on shortening the length of homelessness experienced by anyone in our community.

Focusing on housing first, however, does not mean that housing is the only service offered. For many this housing will come in the form of permanent supportive housing, which offers social and clinical services to residents depending upon their level of need. These needs include medical care, mental health services, rent assistance, or other kinds of support. Research has shown that addressing other life issues in the context of permanent housing is the best way to affect permanent change in the lives of homeless people, be they chronically homeless adults or homeless families.

* *Moving people into housing first saves money*

A study by Portland State University showed that homeless people spend 65 percent less time in hospitals and visited the emergency room 51 percent less once they moved into permanent supportive housing

Why focus on chronic homelessness?

On any given night, about 4,000 people sleep on the streets or in shelters across Portland. Homeless people can be adults, young people, couples, or families with children. They are living on the streets, either temporarily or for the long term, for a variety of reasons. They may be homeless because of an untreated mental illness, a physical disability, domestic violence, the loss of a job, or a drug addiction. They may be experiencing a financial crisis and have been evicted from their home for the first time; they may cycle from homelessness to housing and back to homelessness again; or they may be chronically homeless, having lived on the streets for many months or years.

This plan has a focus on chronically homeless people—mostly single adults who have been homeless for a year or more, though families can also experience chronic homelessness. Chronically homeless people are typically the most visible and troubling part of the homeless population, suffering from problems like drug addiction, mental illness, or other disabilities. They often recycle through our system unsuccessfully and place heavy economic burdens on taxpayer-funded programs. This drain on resources limits our ability to effectively serve others who are homeless or may become homeless.

Homelessness affects many families as well. Every year, approximately 2,200 people in families are homeless in Multnomah County. Unfortunately, this is often a cycle—research suggests that homelessness in families puts kids at risk of school failure, mental health problems, and substance abuse. Because of the difficulties they face while young, these children often grow up and fall back into homelessness by themselves or with their own families, creating a multigenerational homelessness problem.

While this plan emphasizes ending adult chronic homelessness, we remain committed to efforts to end homelessness for all people, including families. We also believe that families can experience chronic homelessness and are committed to understanding and serving this population effectively. By implementing this plan, we will build a system that serves all homeless people more effectively.

Using our resources more effectively

Chronically homeless people currently consume about half the resources spent on all homeless programs. These are the people for whom the current system is not enough. They are the homeless population most likely to be cycled back out onto the street rather than supported in permanent housing. When homeless people enter the homeless system and move back out into the streets, it creates strain on homeless programs and pressure on institutions like jails and hospitals.

By concentrating resources first on housing chronically homeless people, we will eliminate this pressure on the system, allowing us to use the homeless system more effectively for other homeless people, including families and those who are temporarily homeless. It will also help us respond more quickly and prevent homelessness when it threatens a person or family.

Who has a stake in ending homelessness?

The City of Portland and Multnomah County invest public funds and operate programs that provide direct services to homeless people and families. The City and County also fund services provided by nonprofit organizations and private service agencies. Corrections facilities, hospitals, schools, churches, and charities also provide assistance to



homeless people. All are partners in the “homeless system” and have a direct stake in providing effective and efficient services with a goal to end homelessness.

The wider community also has a stake in ending homelessness. As members of a community, we want to take care of our citizens, including those with illnesses or disabilities who cannot care for themselves. In addition, all of us want safe, clean, and livable streets and neighborhoods.

Nine actions that will end homelessness



Progress towards permanently eliminating homelessness requires action by all partners in the homeless system: by local governments; by social service providers and nonprofits who regularly provide services to homeless people; and by the hospitals, corrections facilities, and others who have homeless people in their systems.

These are the steps by which we will end homelessness by 2015:

1. Move people into housing first.

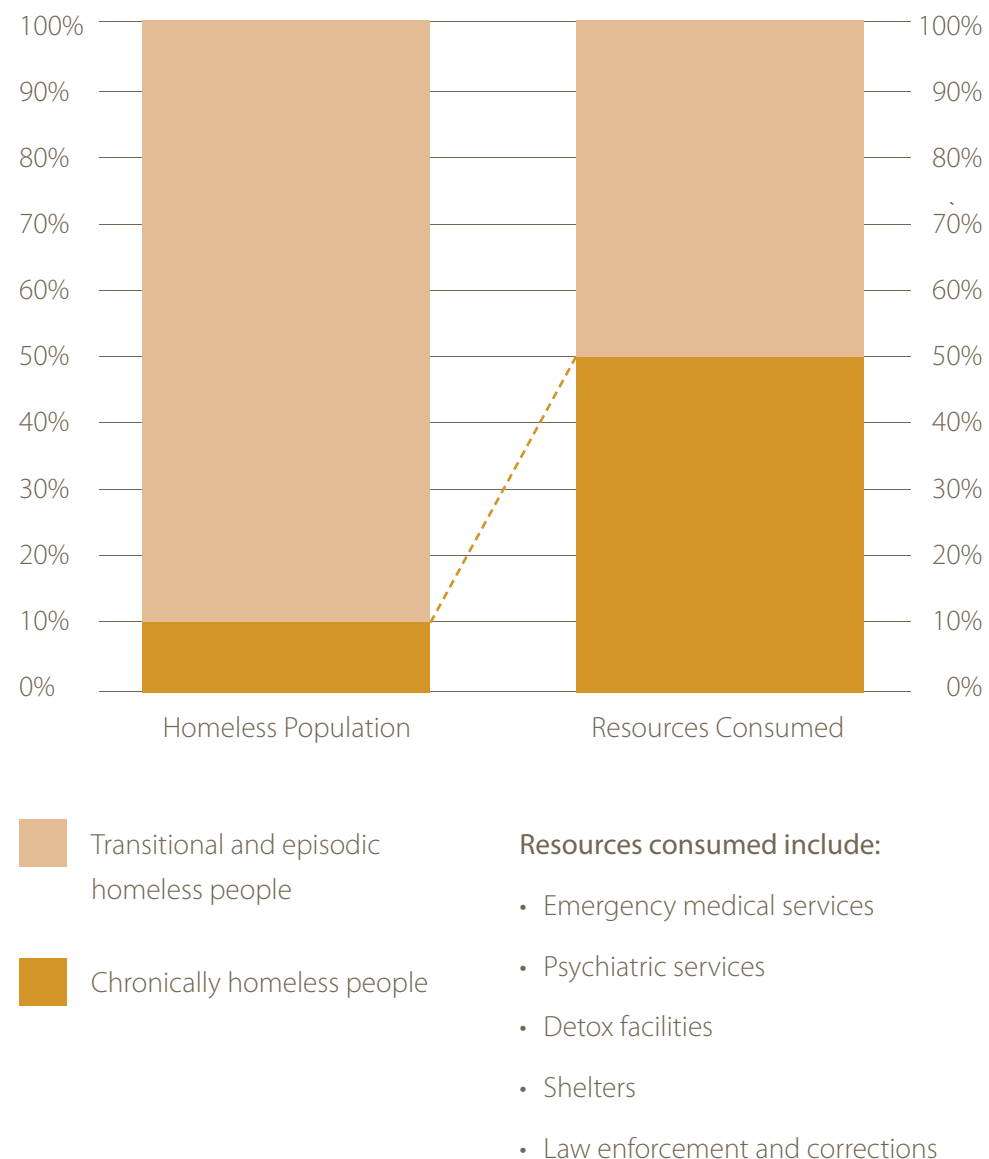
The most critical issue facing all homeless people—the lack of permanent housing—will be addressed first. Other services and programs directed at homeless people and families will support and maintain homeless people in this permanent housing.

2. Stop discharging people into homelessness.

When institutions like jails and hospitals discharge homeless people, they often struggle to link them to appropriate services because there is a lack of permanent supportive housing available. This also applies to the foster care system, which discharges young people at the age of 18, who are also at risk of becoming homeless.

Chronically homeless people consume more resources

Chronically homeless people—those who have been homeless a year or more—consume about half of the total resources spent on all homeless programs in Portland and Multnomah County, even though they represent only 10 percent of the total homeless population.



Culhane Metraux, Hadley, *The New York/New York Agreement Cost Study* (CSH 2001)

* *We are beginning to create housing for chronically homeless people*

41 units of permanent housing with mental health and other service support will be available with the creation of Prescott Terrace, a partnership of the City of Portland, Multnomah County, the Housing Authority of Portland, and Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare

Implementation of this plan will help these institutions avoid discharging people to the streets by providing links to the right services and more permanent supportive housing.

3. *Improve outreach to homeless people.*

Linking homeless people to services and permanent housing will occur more quickly and effectively through coordinated outreach and engagement.

Outreach workers will be able to offer homeless people immediate access to permanent housing, rather than requiring many intermediate steps before access to housing is offered.

The creation of a new resource space will be considered as one tool to improve access to homeless assistance as well as provide a place for engagement. This facility will be equipped with basic necessities such as lockers and showers. Most importantly, this resource space will provide homeless people with quick and direct access to programs that move them directly into permanent housing. Services will be tailored to the varying needs of homeless people, including services for women who are victims of domestic violence, immigrants who do not speak English or for whom English is a second language, and people with mental and physical disabilities.

In addition to the new center, we will improve homeless families' access to assistance through Multnomah County's six regional service centers and culturally specific sites in order to ensure that the basic needs and safety of children are met.

4. *Emphasize permanent solutions.*

Too few homeless people are currently placed and supported in permanent housing. Too many are using the shelter system as temporary housing.

Only 27 percent of people now in the homeless system are placed in permanent housing. We will increase this number to 40 percent within three years. By 2012, we will place and maintain 60 percent of homeless people in permanent housing—this will more than double the number of people currently placed in permanent housing.

Homeless shelters were originally designed as temporary safe places for homeless people. With the growth of chronic homelessness, shelters are forced to house people for longer and longer periods of time. Under this plan shelters will return to their original purpose by providing easier access into shelters and quicker transition out of them. The length of time that homeless people stay in emergency shelters will be reduced from the current average stay of 150 days to no more than 45 days.



5. *Increase supply of permanent supportive housing.*

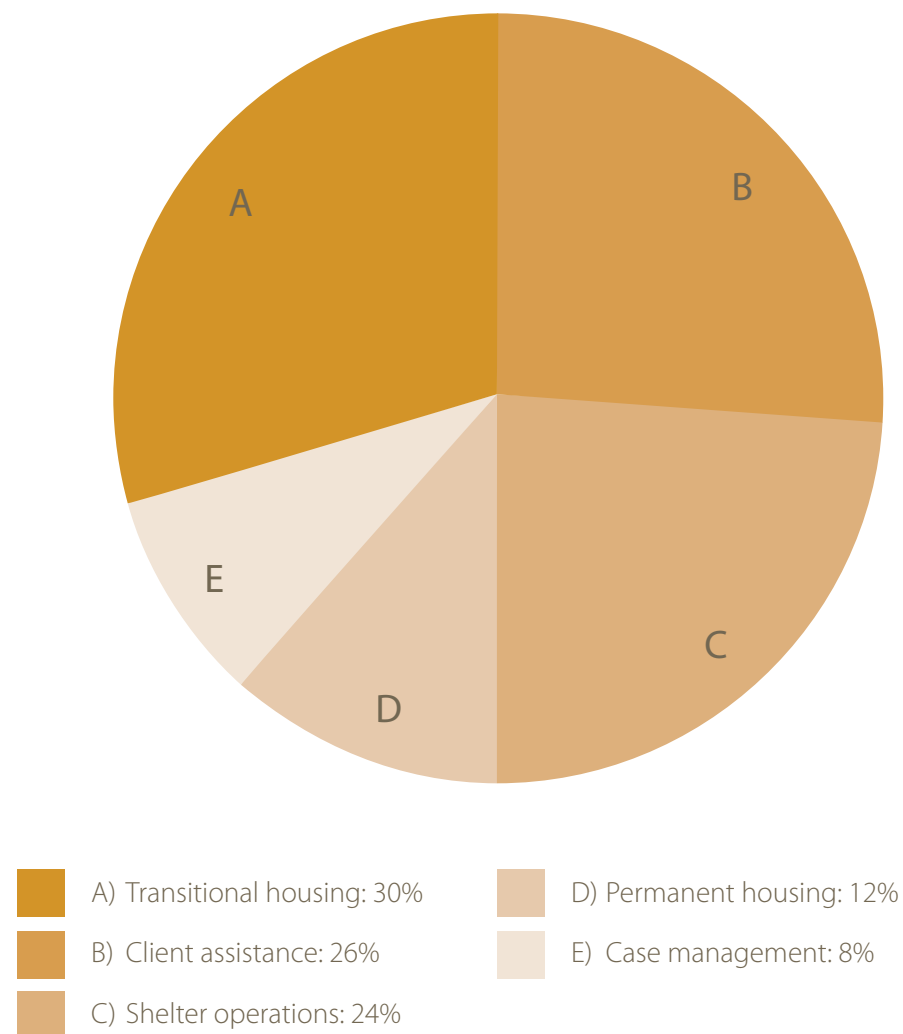
By 2015, the City and County will create 1,600 new housing units designated for the chronically homeless and 600 new units designated for homeless families. These will be permanent supportive housing units, offering social services to residents depending upon their level of need.

These additional housing units will be added to the homeless system's permanent units through new construction, renovation and conversion of other types of housing, and leasing units from the private sector. We will undertake to build the most cost-effective permanent supportive housing available.

Homeless funding by activity

About \$30 million is spent on services for homeless people in Portland every year, yet only about 12 percent of that money is currently spent on permanent housing.

Total FY 02–03 funding: \$32 million from federal, state, local, and private resources*



*An additional \$16 million was allocated in FY 02–03 funding for the construction of transitional and permanent housing for homeless persons.

* We are already providing rent assistance that works

Since 2001, “Transitions to Housing” has provided 524 households with short-term rent assistance. After six months, 83 percent of these households retain permanent housing without additional rent assistance

6. Create innovative new partnerships to end homelessness.

Ending homelessness in 10 years will require tremendous effort and resources.

We will strengthen relationships and partnerships among government agencies, nonprofits, and institutions in order to leverage funding that is available for permanent supportive housing.

Coordination among partners in the homeless system must also be improved. For example, an institutional divide between housing and service funding still stymies the development of more permanent supportive housing.

By demonstrating our success in moving homeless people and families into permanent housing, we also hope to recruit new partners, including the business community and ordinary citizens.

These new partnerships will bring us the additional resources necessary to completely end chronic homelessness. With the addition of new partners and new resources, we will be able to respond more quickly to homelessness when it happens—and even prevent it in the first place.

7. Make the rent assistance system more effective.

We will effectively coordinate existing rent assistance programs to sustain homeless people in permanent housing once they are placed there.

Rather than having multiple service providers and jurisdictions provide rent assistance through different programs, we will offer a streamlined program of rent assistance. Such assistance is particularly critical for families, who fare best when placed in permanent housing as quickly as possible upon facing homelessness or its threat.

To those who are already homeless, outreach workers will be able to offer rent assistance immediately upon moving them to a permanent housing situation, rather than waiting while application is made to a rent-assistance program.

8. Increase economic opportunity for homeless people.

The City and County will work together to streamline the system that offers workforce assistance to homeless people.

Examples of this kind of change include:

- Greater access of homeless people to centers that provide job placement, job training, and employment counseling.
- Coordinated efforts to increase employment and wages for homeless people.
- The development of common standards that measure the employment outcomes of homeless people.
- Addressing gaps in the system. Child care, for example, is critical if homeless families are to gain employment and sustain themselves in housing.

The City and County will also work with the State of Oregon and federal agencies on streamlining the receipt of disability benefits by homeless people who are eligible and in need, but who are not currently receiving benefits.

9. Implement new data-collection technology throughout the homeless system.



By 2005 all partners in the homeless system will adopt the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a web-based system that helps in data collection and research about the homeless population. This will allow us to examine more accurately the numbers of homeless people, the frequency of homelessness, and the depth and breadth of homelessness.

* **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)**

In March of 2004 the City of Portland received a \$460,000 grant from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to implement the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a web-based database that aids in data collection and research about homelessness

In addition, HMIS will tell us what works and what does not work. This tool will help us:

- Determine if effective discharge planning from institutions is being done.
- Track the outcomes for homeless people who access the system.
- Plan more effectively to serve greater numbers of homeless people.

How will we know if the plan is successful?

In order to make sure that this plan works, we have built in a system of accountability and measurable outcomes. No public funds will be used for programs or services that do not demonstrate measurable success at ending homelessness.

To gauge our success over time, the action steps above will be tied to specific and measurable outcomes for each program or service; these will be reviewed biannually by funders and reported to citizen stakeholders. If program outcomes are not met, those programs will see a reduction in public funding.

Conclusion

This plan lays out the changes that we need to institute over time in order to effect change. This plan is not about a one-time-only change; to the contrary, it is the framework for an evolution in policy and services targeted at homeless people.

The key to this plan's success will be in our commitment to innovation and accountability. We will be open to innovative ideas to end homelessness, but they must be ideas that can demonstrate success. Our goal must always be to implement what works.



The public involvement process that created this plan

During the last year, the 15 members of the Citizens Commission on Homelessness have been working with the broader community to develop the components of this 10-year plan.

Through regular meetings, the Commission has been developing and reviewing recommendations designed to increase coordination across the homeless system and maximize the system's effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. Participating in the Commission's work was a broad cross-section of community experts and activists, state, city and county program staff, community-based service agency representatives, private citizens and most importantly, homeless and formerly homeless people. In fact, this plan is one of the first homeless plans developed in Portland to incorporate the direct experience of homeless people.

A second planning body was established to continue the necessary coordination and planning with non-profit agencies and other groups and people with interests in homelessness. The Plan to End Homelessness Coordinating Committee represents a constituency of non-profit agencies, "mainstream" agencies serving homeless people (such as County Community Justice, health and mental health departments and the Housing Authority of Portland), representatives from other planning bodies, and homeless and formerly homeless people.

The wider community was also involved in the development of this 10-year plan. The Homeless Work Group sponsored by Southeast Uplift hosted a series of community forums to discuss combating homelessness from a neighborhood perspective. Input from these neighborhood forums has been instrumental in shaping the development of this plan.

EXPECT CHANGE

Goals that will be met by December 31, 2005

- 175 chronically homeless people will have homes
- 160 new units of permanent supportive housing will be opened and 300 additional units will be under development
- 20 “hard to reach” homeless youth will be permanently housed
- Waiting lists for shelters and numbers of those turned away from shelters reduced by a minimum of five percent
- Rent assistance program reforms will be completed to produce a streamlined administration and better outcomes for families and individuals
- 250 homeless families with children will be permanently housed, 50 of whom will be high resource users
- Resources for permanent supportive housing will increase from 12 percent to 20 percent of the overall amount spent by the homeless system
- An enhanced partnership to end homelessness will be formalized by public and private community partners
- The new Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database will be fully operational in 26 homeless service agencies



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