

Vermont Council on Homelessness
Wednesday, June 17th, 2015, 2:00 – 4:00
AHS Central Office - Training Room
208 Hurricane Lane, Suite 103, Williston

Minutes

Present: Connie Snow (W&WHT), Polly Nichol (VHCB), Daniel Blankenship (VSHA), Beth Meyer (AOE), Paul Dragon (OEO), Linda Ryan (SHI), Deborah Hall (HPC), Donna Sherlaw (at-large), Tyler Sweeten (VCIL), Calvin Smith (VCRHYP), Shaun Gilpin (DHCD), Kristin Prior (AHS), Sean Brown (DCF), Ken Schatz (DCF), Rich McInerney, (SSHP), Margaret Bozik (CHT), Jan Demers (CVOEO), Chris Dalley (DCF), David DeAngelis (Brattleboro Housing), Elizabeth Ready (John Graham Shelter), Erhard Mahnke (VT Affordable Housing Coalition), Renee Sarao (VAHC/VAHC), Angus Chaney (AHS)

Angus called the meeting to order at 2:05. A quorum was present.

Introductions and Announcements: Angus welcomed new council member Donna Sherlaw from Lamoille County and suggested at least one of this year's meetings be moved to Hartford or Springfield region to accommodate members from the southern part of the state. Ultimately, meetings will be returning to space at the new state office complex in Waterbury.

Public comment: No one present offered public comment.

Discussion: Youth Homelessness, National Strategies -Calvin Smith, Executive Director, VCRHYP

Calvin presented a slideshow outlining VCRHYP programs, who is and is not included in national definitions, common circumstances among Vermont youth experiencing homelessness, geographic distribution of homeless youth in Vermont, Vermont trends, lessons learned about a strong safety net, and the major challenge of finding housing. Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) programs are community-based programs operating outside the juvenile justice and child welfare systems that provide runaway prevention, outreach, shelter, mediation, and transition services to runaway, homeless, or street youth or youth at risk of running away or becoming homeless. The Runaway & Homeless Youth Act created funding for programs that address the needs of RHY in Vermont through two programs:

1. Basic Center Program - provides prevention supports to youth at risk of runaway/homelessness; emergency shelter for up to 21 days; resources to meet the basic needs of youth such as food and clothing; counseling; and aftercare services to reunify youth with their families.
2. Transitional Living Program - allows youth 16-22 to reside in housing for up to 18 months while obtaining employment, education, health, mental health, and independent living supports to help them transition to self-sufficiency.

VCRHYP programs serve approximately 900 youth per year. Each youth is unique and has their own individual set of circumstances, however there are some common characteristics of youth that seek help at Coalition agencies:

- Vermont RHY look different from street youth in urban areas. In VT, most RHY remain intentionally invisible - commonly couch surfing, sleeping in abandoned buildings, and camping out.
- Family Instability - abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental substance use, and family conflict.
- Disconnection - These youth are mostly disconnected from school, workforce, family & social supports - they have few meaningful and long-lasting relationships with adults and generally do not feel like they are “part of” the community.
- Most have experienced some type of trauma (exposure to violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, etc.)
- Youth homelessness is strongly correlated with poverty. Most come from families that live in poverty - often intergenerational poverty. One study found that 40% of homeless youth had parents who received public assistance or lived in public housing. Many RHY report a history of residential instability that dates back to when they were still with their family.
- Systems Involvement - Some have had system involvement and “aged out” or run from the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Others have slipped through or around the child welfare system. RHY generally avoid anything they perceive as “a system” and often manage to intentionally avoid child welfare interventions. Others live in very unhealthy environments that have not quite met the threshold for child welfare intervention.
- Pregnant/parenting youth have a significantly higher incidence of homelessness. Up to 50% of street youth will have a pregnancy experience and 1/3 of parenting teens have experienced homelessness.

Over the past 5 years, VCRHYP sites have seen an increase in older youth (16+) seeking services, and for most of these youth returning home is not an option. Needs & Issues are becoming more complex - youth are arriving with complex and intense challenges/issues occurring at the same time (employment, education, housing, substance use, mental health, pregnancy). This reality makes composing a standardized strategy for “case management” nearly impossible because youth care workers are doing the best they can to respond to multiple problems simultaneously.

- Prevention and Outreach is the critical first step towards an effective community response to youth homelessness (eg: through schools, case management supports for youth & families, etc). RHY are reluctant to seek any kind of help that they think may result in being referred into a “system”.
- Drop-in Centers and Teen Centers provide low-barrier opportunities for youth to engage and connect with community resources. These centers can also provide support services including medical care, substance use treatment, etc.
- Emergency Temporary Shelter is critical to get youth off the street. The longer youth remain homeless, the risks of experiencing physical assault, rape, human trafficking, and mental health disabilities are greatly amplified. In VT, we mostly use “host home” model sheltering.
- Family engagement and intervention when appropriate - engagement of extended families, non-relative supportive adults and other natural supports are critical. Self-identified family including peers have a tremendous influence on RHY.
- Case Management works to improve wellness and decision-making. Research shows that individualized and regular case management works. Youth care workers help you build independent living skills and learn how to navigate complex bureaucratic systems, obtain benefits for themselves, and understand and advocate for their rights. Relationships can be a vehicle for change and these youth need relationships that offer permanency.
- Youth appropriate housing programs that provide transitional housing (12-24 months) and build independent living skills.
- Education is the clearest road out of homelessness and poverty. Reconnecting homeless youth back to educational systems increases future income earning capability. Most of the youth our agencies work with have not been successful in traditional education, and they need alternative education pathways.

- Workforce Development to enable youth to compete in the job market. Finding self-supporting employment is difficult for homeless youth who have had limited educational attainment and employment experiences. Runaway and homeless youth need more progressive and direct paths to the workforce. Programs that partner with youth to experience employment and teach youth the interpersonal skills and soft skills to be successful are crucial.

Need for housing has increased - In FY 2009, VCRHYP provided 11,651 nights of shelter or housing supports, and in FY 2013 we provided over 27,000 nights. A lack of affordable housing in Vermont compounds the problem. Vermont is a desirable place to live, that combined with a rental vacancy rate of less than 1% has resulted in housing costs that rank among the highest in the country. High correlation to poverty that mirrors national trends of rising youth poverty - In 2001, the national poverty rate among 18-24 year olds was about 11%. As of 2011, that percentage had doubled with about one in five (23%) of 18-24 year-olds living in poverty. Affordable housing is a major issue for all ages of Vermonters and Housing dollars for youth housing are extremely limited. Current models used in Vermont to house youth include:

- Emergency temporary shelter - mostly through host homes
- Transitional Housing Models for Youth:
- Congregate transitional housing - Include independent living skills instruction. Group living models can co-locate housing with services & supports, but struggle to find a way to balance the need for personal space with the economies of scale achieved in congregate living. It's also the most expensive type of youth housing (facilities & staffing).
- Scattered site apartments - subsidized apartments through private landlords.
- Master leasing - agency is the leaseholder and moves different youth in and out as available, carries more risk for the agency.

Offering a variety of housing supports has proven most effective for youth in Vermont but each model has its challenges.

Margaret – Question on link to school system? Calvin – We're a resource for guidance counselors.

Calvin – HUD has identified homeless youth as a national priority but not dedicated new funding. The re-allocation discussions will be difficult.

Angus – Is there a role for boardinghouse or SRO model with youth? Calvin – Concerns about mixing populations. Connie – We experimented with SRO model for youth in Brattleboro; Mixed results. Kids didn't necessarily want to live in that setting. Scattered sites may be more effective. There can be a dilemma with master-leasing certain tax credit units.

Chris – How do landlords rent to a 16 year old? Calvin – They can only enter into a lease if they are emancipated.

Angus – Can you elaborate on current national tensions between historical FYSB approach and current direction from USICH? Calvin – Youth programs have grassroots origins. Understandable tension as new national guidance seeks to standardize approach. Local challenges with data and shifting from our current system to HMIS. Want to emphasize that youth homelessness is different.

Brief Updates: Ending Family Homelessness 2020 -Angus Chaney

- VSHA is developing a voucher preference.

- VHFA has received support for first-time home-buyer assistance to help improve rental market.
- AHS is working internally and with many partners to turn the general Vermont framework into detailed action items with measures; forming workgroups.
- Angus will send working draft to group as well as a report from Polly documenting increased maternal and child health risks associated with homelessness.

Follow-Up Discussion: Re-thinking emergency housing

– DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz and Dep. Commissioner Sean Brown

DCF updated the group on recent meetings with local Continuum of Care, OEO advisory group and others. Meetings have been positive. Sean noted the need for data and a better data collection methodology has been a key theme.

Ken – in listening to feedback at local meetings, it's clear local needs vary. In some areas it may also be a relatively small number of homeless households with high needs that are interacting with many providers. Our discussions have not just been limited to shelter but also to Rapid Re-Housing. Moving toward a process of bringing DCF emergency shelter into the HOP (Housing Opportunity Program) RFP.

Linda – Concerns with rules that don't make sense and disqualify families from 100% of a benefit when they are just a few dollars over. What about a sliding scale instead?

Angus – Some of these items which are driving the problem but not directly related to emergency housing we intend to address through local meetings state agency staff will be having with local Continuum groups. Interested in identifying what state programs might warrant categorical eligibility for people experiencing homelessness.

Elizabeth – VT Rental Subsidy hugely important but availability of housing is the issue. Hard to have a plan for emergency housing without housing. We need changes to the five year (Con) plan to prioritize housing for people who are homeless. Shaun – Updates on Consolidated Plan. The new plan does elevate homelessness as a priority and sets targets. On the other hand, we want to prevent the scenario where units are being held vacant or people have to become homeless to get housing.

Angus – Is DCF moving toward a model where eligibility is standard statewide but eligible activities (shelter, etc.) might vary widely from region to region? Ken – We want to move away from all the eligibility debates and use instead the standard HUD definition of homelessness as the eligibility.

Angus – To Elizabeth's point, there does seem to be some need to strengthen the 10% incentive in the Qualified Allocation Plan. Connie – Windsor and Windham have already done much with the current incentive. Angus agreed and noted CHT's work as well. Angus asked the housers on the council to think about sharing effective models with their peers for replication. Connie, Margaret and David agreed it was the relationship and trust developed between the local service and housing partners that was the most significant success factor.

Ken – Next steps for DCF Emergency Housing initiative is to continue meeting with local and statewide stakeholders to present a plan in January to cover state fiscal year '17.

Donna – Question on where local meetings have already occurred. DCF listed where those have happened. Richard asked about timeline for Springfield and Linda about St. Albans.

Approval of April minutes:

Approval of the April minutes was moved by Daniel and seconded by Linda. All voted in favor minus abstentions. April minutes approved.

Other Updates from Council Members and Continuum of Care

Daniel Blankenship shared a draft of the Vermont State Housing Authority's new voucher preference which will prioritize federal section 8 rental assistance for up to 100 homeless families with intensive case management supports.

Meeting adjourned at 4PM.