

WISCONSIN COALITION AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

A ROADMAP TO ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN WISCONSIN

INTRODUCTION

Every day in the State of Wisconsin, an estimated 20,000 persons are homeless. The majority are young children.

The cost of this level of homelessness in Wisconsin is staggering; devastating our communities both socially and fiscally. Expenses related to the needs of the homeless impacts every governmental service and all levels of Wisconsin and local government. The burden placed on corrections, mental health services, health care and workforce development is immense and growing. Homeless adults have difficulty seeking and maintaining employment. The stress of housing instability wreaks havoc on family dynamics, causing an increase in domestic violence and other social dysfunctions.

Hidden from view is that the majority of the homeless in Wisconsin are children whose ages range from infants to teenagers. The rising number of homeless children has increased child welfare costs. The same housing instability that causes stress on adults uproots and destabilizes the lives of homeless children. Solid research has shown that children who move often, and are without a solid home base, continuously lag in their school performance. Moving from place to place, often with “friends” or distant relatives provide opportunities for physical, mental and sexual abuse. The trauma of not knowing where you will sleep at night, especially for a child, will be lasting with Wisconsin taxpayers paying the increased costs for many years to come.

HOMELESSNESS IS INCREASING IN WISCONSIN

By all measures homelessness in Wisconsin is increasing at an alarming pace. According to the HUD Point in Time Count, Wisconsin ranks fifth nationally in terms of the increase of homeless individuals from 2007-2015, an increase of 24.5%. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction collects data on homeless children. Their data indicates that from 2003-2015 the number of homeless children in Wisconsin has increased a whopping 241%; from 5,354 in 2003 to 18,300 in 2015. An examination of DPI data by school district shows that homelessness in Wisconsin is an issue that reaches every part of the State, not just urban centers.

In addition, all federally funded homeless programs in Wisconsin contribute client data to a statewide data base. That data base reports that State agencies served 27,291 homeless persons in 2014; up 17% from 2010, and that 61% of those served were newly homeless. The reported number is probably higher since not included in the count are homeless clients served by programs operated by faith communities that do not accept government funding.

WISCONSIN STATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

In response to the ever growing numbers of homeless persons in Wisconsin, local governments and private resources have struggled to combat the problem. Notably absent from the effort to reduce homeless has been Wisconsin State Government. After some early modest investment in the 1980's and 1990's there have been no additional State resources in the past twenty years. Wisconsin's funding for homeless programs remains stuck at a paltry \$3.25 million per year. In addition Wisconsin has no State plan to reduce and end homelessness and no high level interagency mechanism to coordinate activities between various State agencies which impact the homeless.

WISCONSIN LAGS BEHIND OUR NEIGHBORS

The State of Minnesota allocates just over \$44.3 million per year in GPR for homeless services throughout the State and has a vibrant and effective Interagency Council on Homelessness administered by staff in the Governor's office. In addition, Minnesota just completed a \$100 million bonding effort to build 5,000 units of permanent supportive housing. Illinois has an annual GPR allocation of \$53 million for homeless programs and Michigan apportions \$16 million. In addition, the Governor of Michigan recently signed an executive order establishing an interagency council which will operate much like the one in Minnesota. All of these neighboring States have an adopted plan to reduce and end homelessness with clear metrics and areas of responsibility assigned to State agencies which impact the homeless.

POLICY AND BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS TO END HOMELESSNESS IN WISCONSIN

1. Create an Interagency Council on Homelessness chaired by the Governor with mandatory involvement by the Secretaries and Directors of all State agencies which impact the homeless in Wisconsin. The Council would be charged with creating a plan to reduce and end homelessness in Wisconsin; create metrics associated with the plan; assign responsibility for achieving those metrics; and measure success in reaching metric goals.
2. Use existing resources: The State has a wide range of resources that may be tapped to combat homelessness such as TANF, Medicaid, Corrections, Workforce Development and mental health funds, and others. Because these funds reside in myriad of State agencies, appropriate disbursement of these resources would have to be coordinated and allocated through the actions of a strong interagency council. If an interagency council is not considered the best route, we recommend that an Office to End Homelessness be created within the Office of the Governor and that appropriate resources from State agencies be carved out and put at the disposal of that office.
3. Increase State funding for emergency shelters: Shelters are the 911/emergency room for the homeless. As noted above Wisconsin has not increased funding for emergency

shelters since the early 1990's and Federal homeless programs do not provide funding for emergency shelters. Emergency shelters are critical triage centers for the homeless. Each family and individual has unique barriers and circumstances that have contributed to their current crisis situation. It is at the shelter level that barriers can be identified and a successful plan is developed to address the needs of each client and/or family.

4. Create a homelessness prevention program: In many cases homelessness, with all of its social and fiscal costs, can be prevented by a small and very specific amount of financial support. For example: a family has a temporary disruption of income and has fallen behind on rent. The threat of homelessness can be abated using rent assistance. A similar program was implemented in Milwaukee County and studied by Harvard University. Data indicated that this specific and limited approach reduced eviction rates during the recent recession. Unfortunately, the program was temporary and is no longer funded.
5. Create a State fund for services attached to permanent supportive housing projects: One of the most effective ways of ending homelessness is to provide housing with services (supportive housing) to homeless individuals/families. Federal resources provide for the housing costs but do not fund supportive services. Federal applications demand that agencies account for additional funding for supportive services. Providers in Wisconsin are unable to secure supportive service funding, making it impossible to garner a full share of federal dollars.
6. Task WHEDA with creating a financing mechanism for low-income housing development which includes a formula to ascertain and establish rent levels to reach very low income individuals and families.
7. Explore social impact bonding as a way to help fund some of the above program costs: Other States are experimenting with this interesting funding mechanism. Wisconsin should do the same.

CONCLUSION

Many states who have invested in programs to prevent and end homelessness, have seen the size of their homeless populations drop over the last several years; Wisconsin can have the same successes and be a model for the nation in ending homelessness.

The Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness can be contacted at WCAHWI@GMAIL.COM or 414-333-7393