Interagency Commission on Homelessness
Annual Report
2017

Housing for All = A Stronger Montgomery

November 2017

Interagency Commission on Homelessness Membership List

Amy Horton-Newell, Chair, American Bar Association

Brian Tracey, Vice-Chair, Public Member

Uma S. Ahluwalia, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

Dr. Jonathan Brice, Montgomery County Public Schools

Dr. Sheryl Brissett Chapman, National Center for Children and Families

Dr. Raymond Crowel, DHHS, Behavioral Health and Crisis Services

Betsy Davis, Montgomery County Police Department

Kim Emerson, Adventist Healthcare, Inc.

Robert Green, Montgomery County Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Amanda Harris, DHHS, Services to End and Prevent Homelessness

Louise Kauffmann, City of Gaithersburg

Susan Kirk, Bethesda Cares

Councilmember George Leventhal, Montgomery County Council

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Shane Rock, Interfaith Works

Brian Roynestad, Montgomery County Sheriff's Office

Abe M. Schuchman, Housing Unlimited, Inc.

Stanley Seidel, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

Susie Sinclair-Smith, Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless

Clarence J. Snuggs, Department of Housing and Community Affairs

Stacy Spann, Housing Opportunities Commission

Jeffery O. Thames, Hope Restored, Inc.

Mayor Moses Wilds, City of Takoma Park

Senator Craig Zucker, Maryland General Assembly

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Overview

The Interagency Commission on Homelessness (ICH) was established by the Montgomery County Council in 2014 and began its work in 2015 to promote efforts to prevent and end homelessness in Montgomery County. The mission of the ICH is to

- promote a community-wide goal to end homelessness,
- develop and implement a strategic plan,
- educate the community about homelessness,
- promote partnerships to improve the County's ability to prevent and reduce homelessness,
- monitor programs that are components of the Continuum of Care and
- make recommendations to the County Executive and County Council to improve the Continuum of Care.

The ICH has also been designated as the Governing Board of the Continuum of Care.

The Continuum of Care (CoC) is Montgomery County's local homeless program planning network. It is a public-private partnership that includes County and other government agencies, non-profit service providers, landlords and others who have a role in preventing and ending homelessness. The purpose of the CoC is to coordinate the implementation of a housing and service system within the Montgomery County CoC geographic area that meets the needs of individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The Montgomery CoC provides a full continuum of housing services to homeless persons including:

- outreach and engagement,
- emergency and transitional shelter,
- safe havens,
- rapid re-housing,
- permanent supportive housing and
- prevention strategies.

Strategic Direction

In October 2014, the ICH approved a Ten-Year Pan to End Homelessness after an extensive, community-wide planning process. The resulting plan is aligned with the Federal plan to end homelessness, Opening Doors, which was developed by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.   The Plan's overarching goals are as follows:

- Prevent and end homelessness among Veterans by the end of 2015.
- Finish the job of ending chronic homelessness by the end of 2017.
- Prevent and end homelessness for families, youth, and children by 2020.
- Set a path to ending all types of homelessness.

This year, the ICH and CoC participated in a system "Gaps Analysis" of the housing and homeless continuum. The methodology included data collection on system performance, examination of the budget and funding priorities, focus groups of people experiencing homelessness and utilizing homeless services, and interviews with stakeholders including providers from a wide range of agencies and service areas. Through this process, the ICH identified the need to revisit the Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness as well as the operations of the ICH. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, the ICH and the CoC will engage community stakeholders, policy makers, and service providers in a strategic planning event to update and revise the Ten-Year Plan to End Homeless and develop an action plan to achieve the stated goals. Finally, the ICH will work with federal partners to conduct a fiscal scan to develop a deeper understanding of funding sources and resource gaps.

The work over the past year has focused on the goal of ending chronic homelessness by the spring of 2018. The CoC maintains a robust "By-Name-List" of all households meeting the federal definition of chronic homelessness or at risk of meeting the definition of chronically homeless. Through a variety of strategies, adequate resources have been secured to provide Housing First Permanent Supportive Housing for all individuals identified on the Chronic By-Name-List. No families in Montgomery meet the definition of chronic homelessness. To leverage federal resources including Medicaid dollars for supportive services, the target date for this initiative has been extended to March 2018. The following CoC activities in FY17 have supported this goal:

- Developed a comprehensive street outreach strategy to provide targeted, housing-focused case management to individuals experiencing street homelessness and disengaged from all other services.

- Created a communication plan for educating the public and engaging all stakeholders.

- Implemented a "Move-up" strategy in partnership with the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) to create a true continuum of care that allows ebb and flow as a household's housing support needs change. The "Move-up" effort enabled stable tenants who are currently in a permanent supportive housing (PSH) program but no longer need regular social services to transition to non-PSH subsidized housing with limited case management.

- Approved for the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 1115 Medicaid Waiver Demonstration Assistance in Community Integrations Services Pilot Program to maximize the utilization of Medicaid funding for housing support services for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness or returning to homelessness from long-term institutionalization.

- Restructured and expanded the County's permanent supportive housing project called the Housing Initiative Program to better align with Housing First principles and meet the service needs of households experiencing chronic homelessness.

- Created a new assessment tool to determine the acuity of a household's service needs. This scale allows providers to deploy staffing resources based on the frequency and intensity of case management needs.

In addition to the work on ending chronic homelessness, significant steps have been taken toward the goal of ending homelessness for families with children. These include:

- Trained and piloted a common screening and assessment tool embraced by national experts called the Family Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (Family VI-SPDAT).

- Increased the system capacity to serve families in Rapid Re-housing by shortening the length of stay, enhancing support services, and offering more flexibility in rental assistance.

- Participated in a learning collaborative to better support families with child welfare involvement and experiencing homelessness.

The ICH will continue to make progress on achieving the goal of making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring in Montgomery County. Future strategies include the following:

- Creating a true person-centric system of care with Housing First principles. This means that the essential function of our system is housing and that we must focus on that goal with immediacy for every household we serve.

- Strengthening our crisis response system. This means that we will create a robust Coordinated Entry System, engage mainstream partners more strategically and meaningfully in our work and re-tool our service intervention at emergency shelters based on the unique needs of our population.

- Expanding the Rapid Re-housing program by reducing the length of stay and allowing flexibility in the amount of rental assistance offered.

- Refining diversion and prevention programs to prioritize households most in need.

- Expanding Housing First permanent supportive housing programs to serve other vulnerable populations such as households with justice or child welfare involvement.

- Refining the County Rental Assistance Program to offer shallow rental subsides to those most in need and at risk of homelessness.

- Partnering with community housing agencies like the HOC, the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA), and other affordable housing developers to increase the availability of low income housing and rental subsidies through local preferences for households experiencing homelessness.

- Implementing a medical respite program for homeless individuals recently discharged from the hospital with complex medical needs.

- Creating and implementing a Landlord – Tenant Engagement Initiative to increase the number of landlords willing to accept previously homeless households

Community Outreach and Public Engagement

The Interagency Commission was involved in a variety of community outreach events to engage the public. These include:

- The first annual Community Memorial Event honoring the lives lost during 2016 who were part of the homeless community. This event was attended by more than 200 family and friends, policy makers, service providers, and the faith community and provided education on the connection between health and housing.

- Developed a communications strategy and launched the Inside (not Outside) initiative to end chronic homelessness in Montgomery County.

- Created a new website highlighting the work of the ICH and the CoC. www.montgomerycountymd.gov/homelessness.

- Homeless Resource Day 2016 - Montgomery County in partnership with the City of Gaithersburg held its sixth annual "Homeless Resource Day" to reach out to residents experiencing homelessness and connect them with needed community resources and services. More than 400 people attended this highly successful event and received health screenings, registration for mainstream benefits, legal assistance, employment, haircuts and more.

- Representatives of the ICH engaged a variety of stakeholder groups by providing education on issues surrounding homelessness. These groups include the Montgomery Cares Advisory Board, Commission on People with Disabilities, funding collaboratives, civic associations and many others.

Data and Trends regarding Homelessness in Montgomery County

Point-In-Time Count

Montgomery County's homeless point in time survey was conducted on January 25, 2017. A total of 894 homeless persons were counted that day, a decline of 9% over the 2016 count. This overall decrease in homelessness can be attributed to a decline in the sheltered population specifically with the loss of transitional housing for both types of households. There was a 60% reduction in the number of beds available for homeless households with minor children. Households with minor children have been provided housing assistance through the State Rental Allowance Program (which is a time limited subsidy), or connected with non-profit agencies through Public Housing Authority Project Based Voucher program. In addition, homeless families are assessed for diversion or prevention at intake.

Households without children experienced a 1% decrease in 2017 from 623 in 2016 to 616 in 2017. Despite this slight reduction, there was a 31% increase in the unsheltered population. This increase can be attributed to the increased outreach efforts to identify unsheltered chronically homeless persons. In addition to the annual Point in Time count, Montgomery County conducted a special two days "blitz" count in October 2016 and plan to conduct another in early May 2017 to better identify and engage chronically homeless persons.

The number of households with children headed by transition age youth (18-24 years old) decreased 28% from 18 in 2016 to 13 during the 2017 enumeration. The number of unaccompanied transition age youth increased in 2017 to 32, representing a 34% increase from 24 in the 2016 enumeration. In exploring ways to assist transition aged youth, Montgomery County has relocated one transitional shelter to provide services to this population which includes harm reduction and targeted vocational services. Additionally, plans are underway to conduct a widespread homeless youth count in the spring of 2018 that will involve engaging all stakeholders such as involving the Montgomery County public schools, local colleges, youth providers and homeless youth. In October 2017, ICH Chair and County staff convened with national experts to discuss refining our youth strategies.

The table below provides a comparison of the past three years.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S HOMELESS COUNT BY CATEGORY					
Category	2015	2016	2017	Percent Change 2015 to 2017	Percent Change 2015 to 2016
Total Number Counted	1,100	981	894	-19%	-9%
Total Individuals	598	623	616	3%	-1%
Total Number of Families	159	109	86	-56%	-21%
Total Persons in Families	502	358	278	-45%	-22%
Total Adults in Families	184	128	106	-42%	-17%
Total Children in Families	318	230	172	-46%	-25%

Housing Inventory

Montgomery County CoC continues to provide a range of housing options to address the needs of persons experiencing homelessness and help them rapidly exit to permanent housing. The crisis response system includes emergency shelter, overflow shelter and transitional housing options as outlined below.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S Year-Round and Winter Inventory of Beds				
	Beds for Households without Children	Beds\Units for Households with children	Total Year-Round Beds	Total Winter Beds
Hypothermia/Overflow/Other (Additional winter capacity)	240	109/31	0	349
Emergency Shelter Beds	140	140/41	280	0
Transitional / Safe Haven Beds	160	68/20	228	0
TOTALS	540	417/125	508	354

In addition, the CoC continues to expand permanent housing options including Rapid Re-housing and Permanent Supportive Housing for persons in need of supportive housing options to exit homelessness. In 2017, the number of permanent housing beds increased by more than 150 units.

Gaps in the Continuum of Care

The Montgomery County CoC has developed a diverse range of services to prevent and end homelessness in the County, yet gaps remain. These include:

- Lack of sufficient affordable housing for extremely low income homeless individuals and families (i.e. households at or below 30% of the area medium income).

- Lack of adequate permanent supportive housing programs equipped to provide intensive support services to those who do not meet the definition of chronic homelessness (individuals with serious mental illness, chronic substance use, and/or co-occurring disorders).

- Lack of adequate Rapid Re-housing units and employment services for individuals and families.

Funding Recommendations

In support of the CoC's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, the Interagency Commission on Homelessness recommends the following:

- Increasing the supply of affordable housing to extremely low-income families (those below 30% of area median income) who do not have high service needs.

- Increasing funding for the County Rental Assistance Program to allow a greater maximum rental subsidy that is equal to 25% of Fair Market Rent.

- Increasing the community's capacity to provide Rapid Re-housing by 450 units to better serve households that are currently employed or employable.

- Increasing the capacity of the CoC to develop a robust Coordinated Entry System that is aligned with HUD policy.

Legislative or Regulatory Changes Requested

The ICH recommends stronger fair housing policy and legislation that protects individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness against discrimination based on criminal history. Montgomery County has made great strides in promoting equity in housing by protecting against discrimination based on source of income. By limiting a landlord or property manager's ability to automatically deny applicants with a criminal history, we can reduce the length of homelessness and improve access to safe, stable housing.

To increase the availability of affordable housing, the ICH encourages the commitment of dedicated or set aside units or a local homeless preference in multifamily housing developments using federal, state, or local financing and public housing authorities.

Finally, the ICH will be evaluating the Rental Assistance Program to determine if regulatory changes might be needed in the future to make the program more responsive to the needs of the community.

Conclusion

The Montgomery County Continuum of Care goal is to end homelessness for all individuals in our community by making homelessness a rare, brief, and nonrecurring event. Although government resources have been strained over the past few years, the County has continued its commitment to prevent and end homelessness through strategic investment in critical resources. Such strategic investment produced a more effective system that ultimately succeeded in ending Veteran homelessness. While additional targeted funding will likely be needed to produce similar results for chronically homeless individuals and families, the ICH is confident the CoC is operating efficiently and is equipped to serve the County's most vulnerable residents with your continued support.