

The Knowledge Now series features practical research on timely topics from the Colorado Municipal League.

HOMELESSNESS IN COLORADO

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This information is of a general nature and should not be interpreted as legal advice. Local facts determine what laws may apply and how, so you should always consult your municipal attorney before proceeding.

PICTURE OF THE PROBLEM

Homelessness Defined

Homelessness can be defined in many different ways. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has a specific definition, as do other national agencies that provide homelessness services.

This *KnowledgeNow* uses the definition of the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative,¹ which provides the following conditions affecting vulnerable individuals that must be addressed to end homelessness: Sleeping in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation (i.e., cars, parks, or abandoned buildings). This also means living in transitional housing, including a hotel, motel, or with family members.

Individuals without permanent housing are often transitioning out of jail, prison, halfway house, foster care, hospital, detox, or other residential program. They may be facing eviction from their permanent housing. This leads to loitering and congregating in public places due to a lack of a permanent residence. These unstable circumstances define homelessness in Colorado.

Individuals

Homeless individuals have a range of backgrounds. Many have experience in the justice system that becomes a barrier to employment. Offenders are four to six times more likely to report an



episode of homelessness than the general population.²

A disabled population that may not have access to needs and benefits also can result in chronic homelessness. Some have untreated mental illnesses or substance addiction.

Homeless individuals also include senior citizens. With Colorado's aging population, this number continues to grow. These individuals have significant barriers to gaining employment and housing. With the lack of affordable housing and increased costs of living, some seniors find themselves unable to find suitable shelter and stability.

Veterans

Veterans are a significant part of our most vulnerable populations because of difficulties reintegrating into society. This may be due to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a traumatic brain injury while on duty. Those physically disabled while in the military or suffering from behavioral issues have trouble maintaining employment and stable housing. Veterans also may have

difficulty getting services due to their discharge status or a simple lack of awareness that services exist. This population is often thought of as prominently male, but female veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan also find themselves homeless. In 2012, the State of Colorado estimated that there are between 3,000 and 5,000 veterans in Colorado who are, or at-risk of becoming, homeless.³

Families

While there are certainly a large number of homeless individuals in Colorado, what is particularly concerning is how many are members of families. According to the Colorado Department of Education, there are 4,718 children and their families who are living in shelters, motels, or other homeless situations. There are another 17,297 who are living in doubled-up situations, where they are staying with extended family.

This systemic issue in a family can lead to food insecurity, weaker social networks, issues in school, and significant health problems. If a family has experienced domestic violence, the likelihood of anxiety and depression in the children is increased. This requires services beyond food and shelter, and creates a need for behavioral assistance.

1 Sanford, Gary. Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. "Collaborations to Address Housing Instability and Homelessness." Denver. 1 October 2014. Lecture

2 Greenberg, G. A., & Rosenheck, R. A. (2008). Homelessness in the state and federal prison population. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 18, 88-103

3 State of Colorado, Office of the Governor, Pathways Home Colorado, by Gary Sanford, Cara Cheevers, Adam Zarrin, 2012. 18 www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/DOLA-Main/CBON/1251611679326

STATE RESOURCES TO END HOMELESSNESS

Pathways Home Colorado

Created by Gov. John Hickenlooper's Office and the Colorado Division of Housing, Pathways Home Colorado promotes collaboration between business, faith, individual, and foundation partners to ensure that state resources are effectively directed to projects that have proven success in eliminating barriers to housing and services. Pathways Home Colorado is part of Colorado's ongoing efforts to replicate best practice models, support regional priorities and become more strategic in preventing and ending homelessness.

The program has existed since 2012 and is a terrific opportunity for local governments to look at resources and data regarding homelessness.

Colorado Counts, a section of Pathways Home Colorado's plan, is gathering information from six regions throughout the state: Mesa County, Five County Southwest Region (Archuleta, Dolores, La Plata, Montezuma and San Juan Counties), Tri-County Region (Eagle, Garfield, and Pitkin Counties), El Paso County, Pueblo County, and Metropolitan Denver. Colorado Counts is utilizing trained community volunteers to actively seek out and survey those who are, or at risk of becoming, homeless. The hope is to understand the housing and health needs and plan accordingly. Where this may really make a difference is connecting those identified as most vulnerable to needed services within their communities. From 2010 to the present, 3,813 individuals have been surveyed.¹

Pathways Home Colorado set strict goals in 2012 to establish collaborative partnerships, create effective policies, prioritize resources, and engage political leadership to help solve the issue of homelessness. By working with state, local, and federal stakeholders, several goals were reached since its inception. These include establishing development projects with 848 units for the homeless and special needs population. Additionally, with help from the Division of Housing, there was an increased availability of \$100,000 in tax check-off funds for homeless prevention activity programs around the state.

For more information on Pathways Home Colorado, visit www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/DOLA-Main/CBON/1251611679326.

Fort Lyon

When the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs opted to no longer use Fort Lyon as a hospital, the State of Colorado took the campus to use as a prison. Due to budget cuts, the prison was shut down in 2012, and a vacant campus was left unused and a community left without jobs. It was then that the Office of the Governor, in partnership with the Department of Local Affairs, began working to repurpose the building into a treatment, job training, and overall transition facility for the homeless.

One of the most difficult issues when trying to combat homelessness is getting that vulnerable population to services. The proponents' goal was to provide housing and services under the same roof. The League supported this move and worked to approve the use in the 2013 legislative session.

The campus is primarily run by the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless with workers also employed by Bent County. Many residents of the community also have worked to improve Fort Lyon.

As of August 2014, the campus is home to 202 residents, 11 who have since graduated the program and reentered their communities.² The facility still maintains a goal of running at capacity by July 2015 with 300 residents. While Fort Lyon as a homeless facility is still in the early stages, many believe it is possible that it could be a lasting solution for homelessness in Colorado.

For more information on Fort Lyon, visit www.coloradocoalition.org.



¹ State of Colorado, Office of the Governor, Pathways Home Colorado Report, 2.

² McGhee, Tom, "Controversial Fort Lyon homeless facility sends alums into world," *Denver Post*. Aug. 20, 2014. www.denverpost.com/news/ci_26368473/controversial-fort-lyon-homeless-facility-sends-alums-into. Accessed Nov. 1, 2014.

MUNICIPALITIES ENDING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS

It has been proven time and again that the money spent on sufficient housing to prevent homelessness is much less than the costs associated with existing homeless citizens. Occurrences like nuisance violations, healthcare costs, and jail add up to millions a year spent by municipalities on homeless individuals, with \$11 million spent each year in Denver alone.⁴ That is why municipalities are turning to ways to target their vulnerable populations before they become homeless.

Metro Denver

A new focus on homelessness that promotes regional collaborations to increase housing resources and house the most vulnerable plays a large role in metro Denver's homelessness programs. The Metro Denver Homeless Initiative and Denver's Road Home are two important partners moving forward with regional collaboration.

In the metropolitan area, mental illness is a huge factor leading to chronic homelessness. Data collected by the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative's annual point-in-time report show that, as of 2014, 35 percent of homeless individuals identified themselves as having a mental illness.⁵ The most vulnerable must be targeted beyond permanent housing. Individual services for behavioral health, substance abuse, or physical health treatment are imperative to end the cycle of homelessness.

The City of Denver spends an average of \$37,846 per individual in back-end costs for the homeless (jail, court costs, emergency room visits, and detox). By putting service programs in place up front, a city can save thousands of dollars. For example, Portland, Ore., reduced the costs of health care and incarcerations from \$42,075 to \$17,199 by implementing permanent supportive housing. Denver hopes to see similar cost savings as it continues to roll out its 10-year plan against homelessness.

The City of Denver is now looking at a new option for funding chronically homeless individuals using a social impact bond (SIB) to support a broader city homelessness strategy. An SIB is a specific type of social impact financing in which funds are raised from investors to provide social service provider(s) with the working capital to deliver their services. The intent is to incentivize investors by showing positive outcomes while allowing public money to go farther. What this program could do is allow the city to pay for new programs and services while it moves toward long-term preventative solutions by adding dollars to existing resources and tools to make them more effective.⁶

For more information, contact Gary Sanford, Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative executive director, at gary.sanford@unitedwaydenver.org, or Bennie Milliner, Denver's Road Home executive director, at bennie.milliner@denvergov.org

Montrose

To end the cycle of homelessness, it must be a priority in the community. The City of Montrose is an excellent example. Since 2012, the community has come together to form a strategic plan targeted at ending homelessness. In 2014, Montrose focused its community nonprofit funding assistance on the issue of housing and homelessness.

The Montrose Community Foundation initiated community forums and the development of an organized coalition to support the community in its focus on providing housing; this became the Montrose County Coalition on Homelessness. Each member of the coalition provided services to the homeless populations including food, shelter, and reintegration. By coming together and assessing their resources, the coalition was able to achieve new goals for their community.

From 2013-2014, the community:

- created a single-point entry for all of the homeless or near homeless in Montrose County;

⁶ Milliner, Bennie. Denver's Road Home. "Collaborations to Address Housing Instability and Homelessness." Denver, CO. 1 October 2014. Lecture

- became part of the Fort Lyon referral network to ensure the chronically homeless with mental health and substance use are receiving the life change they are seeking;
- asked for and received veteran dollars for clothing, work tools, and housing support.
- received 14 Housing & Urban Development (HUD)-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers for veterans in need of permanent housing; and
- trained churches on "one congregation, one family," a program that pairs mentors from religious congregations, community organizations, and businesses with families and seniors experiencing housing instability.

Into 2015, the organization hopes to further its goals by providing necessary transportation for the homeless and more funding for transitional housing. Reintegration for those citizens coming out of Fort Lyon is also a focus for the community.

For more information, contact William Bell, Montrose city manager, at wbell@ci.montrose.co.us, or Kaye Hotsenpiller, Montrose County Coalition on Homelessness chair, at kayeh@htop.org.

Fort Collins

In 2011, Homeward 2020, a community initiative to make homelessness rare, short-lived, and non-recurring, was created in Fort Collins. The initiative is guided by a volunteer board composed of housing and service providers, advocates, business representatives, individuals with personal experiences of homelessness, law enforcement, and representatives from the City of Fort Collins. The Community Foundation of Northern Colorado serves as the fiscal agent for the initiative. The goal of Homeward 2020 is stable housing for all Fort Collins' citizens experiencing homelessness. In the 10-year plan, specific goals were developed.

- This vital need will be met while acknowledging that there are many support services and case management needed to be available to complement the housing.

⁴ Sanford, Gary. Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. "Collaborations to Address Housing Instability and Homelessness." Denver, CO. 1 October 2014. Lecture

⁵ Brown, Jennifer. "Breakdown: Mental Health in Colorado Part Three of Four." Denver Post 25 Nov. 2014: 1+. Print.

- As much as is possible, the housing process should be simplified and streamlined to decrease the amount of time it takes to help someone move into housing. The availability of affordable and supportive housing also impacts this timeline.
- The available housing must be accompanied with necessary transportation, support services, and case management so that their unique needs are being properly and humanely addressed.
- The Homeward 2020 Ten Year Plan to Make Homelessness Rare, Short-Lived, and Non-Recurring will provide alignment, coordination, and strategic development around Fort Collins's agencies to provide rapid response housing and the full range services for all members of its community that become or are about to become homeless.

The initiative convenes community conversations on homelessness and advocates for research- and evidence-based solution. It also just completed a 2015 Point-in-Time survey. This is data collected on individuals in a given time-frame in a community. The survey helps to assess the need for specific services and where resources should be placed.

For more information, contact Vanessa Fenley, Homeward 2020 director, at vanessa@homeward2020.org.

Rural Homeless Programs

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is a leading partner in the fight against homelessness. While it works in more urban areas, the organization also is working on programs outside of the metro area. The coalition's Rural Initiatives Program has brought together 14 service providers in the state and operates 12 transitional housing programs, one permanent supportive housing program, and one supportive services program. Yet again, there is a forward focus on collaborations within the community. In 2013 alone, 139 families gained transitional and

permanent housing through the program.⁷

Organizations partnering with the Rural Initiatives Program come from all over Colorado. In Canon City, the program partners with Loaves and Fishes Ministry, providing goods, services, and temporary housing to homeless in Fremont County.

In Avon, the coalition partners with the Bright Future Foundation, a nonprofit that provides services to individuals and families affected by domestic violence.

In Alamosa, the coalition works with Lapuente Home Inc., which serves the San Luis Valley by providing food, shelter, and other resources to homeless in crisis.

These are just a few examples of partnerships throughout rural Colorado. The vastness of the homeless problem in Colorado lends itself to partnerships. Cities and towns do not have to go it alone, but, instead, can look to neighboring communities and nonprofits to create long-term solutions to house their most vulnerable population.

⁷ "What We Do: Rural Programs." Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. N.p., 12 Nov. 2014. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.