

HOMELESSNESS IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY:



BEGINNING **TO** END



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HOMELESSNESS IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY:



Montgomery County can end homelessness.

With engaged community stakeholders, government partners, service providers, and indeed, all citizens, we are taking action to ensure that every person in Montgomery County is housed.

Montgomery County must end homelessness.

Our challenges are many. Montgomery County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, has an extremely tight rental market, with a vacancy rate of 1.8%. It is especially difficult for low-income people in the County to locate and secure housing. On a given day in the County, 1,250 people experience homelessness, including 325 children. And over the course of a year, over 3,000 men, women and children receive services in the homeless system. Here, as all over the country, people are discharged from institutions and prisons into homelessness. Children are living in motels with their families— in Montgomery County. People with mental illness or addictions are unable to find a place to call home— in Montgomery County. But, because of these and numerous other examples,

Montgomery County will end homelessness.

How will we end homelessness? Steps on three fronts must be taken: “building the foundation,” “closing the front door,” and “opening the back door.”¹ *Building a foundation* means laying the supports needed for people to end homelessness— providing them with a decent wage, treatment options for any addictions or health problems, and available affordable housing. *Closing the front door* speaks to the tools to keep people housed— preventing folks from needing to enter “the homeless system” by building supports across a community. Finally, we must “*open the back door*” of homelessness by

¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness, *A Plan to End Homelessness- How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*, 2000, www.naeh.org.

quickly moving people out of homelessness and into the housing most appropriate for them.

The analogy of the house in these action fronts is purposeful— people are homeless because they have no place to live. They may have problems that contributed to their homelessness, but the fact remains that they are homeless due to their lack of a residence.

In the beginning. How did Montgomery County get here— to the point of talking about and working together to actually end homelessness? In the early 80s, citizens, congregations, and government became concerned with the number of homeless people on the streets. In response, a number of programs, including shelters and soup kitchens, developed over time to serve homeless people in the County. However, there was a need for coordination of services and advocacy.

The Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless started as an informal group of those agencies, staffed by a County-funded position. The Coalition was not incorporated as a 501 (c) (3) organization until 1991. Over the years, through informal meetings, the Coalition evolved as an umbrella organization for the agencies in the homeless system. Advocacy and identification of gaps in services emerged as key purposes of the Coalition that continue today.

For over twenty years, the caring people of Montgomery County, nonprofit providers, faith-based organizations, volunteers, and government, operated a homeless system that struggled to meet the increasing needs of people experiencing homelessness. Our current system includes prevention programs, outreach, emergency shelters for singles and families, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing. Day programs provide services to men and women to help them engage in services and linkages are made to a range of mainstream services.

“Beginning to End” was developed after a two-year process of community retreats and workgroup meetings— in other words, a great deal of coordination and consultation with providers, stakeholders, and concerned community members created this living document.

In order to end homelessness, many more people than those that work to provide services to homeless individuals and families must choose to act. So, in a sense, we are at the beginning now, too.

Who are the homeless in Montgomery County? The annual one-day census of people experiencing homelessness in the County was conducted on January 24, 2002. Of the 1250 people counted as homeless, 69% are between ages 18 and 59 and 23% are ages 4-17 (see Figure 1). When asked how long they had been homeless, 41% of respondents answered longer than one year and 25% said 1-6 months.

Figure 1- Age

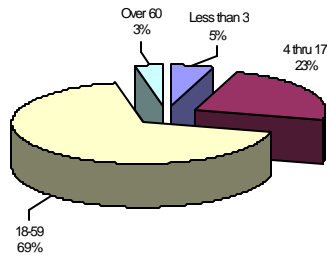
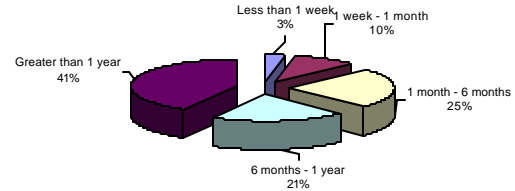


Figure 2- Length of time homeless



There is a housing crisis that makes it extraordinarily difficult to find affordable housing in Montgomery County. The National Low Income Housing Coalition observes that in Montgomery County, an extremely low income family that earns 30% of the area median income of \$86,500 can afford to pay no more than \$649 in monthly rent. The family has to pay \$943 for a two-bedroom unit at fair market rent.² The “housing wage” in the County is \$18.13 an hour. A housing wage is the amount a worker must earn per hour in order to be able to work 40 hours per week and afford a two-bedroom unit at the area’s fair market rent. This hourly wage of \$18.13 is 352% of the current minimum wage.

Local action to end homelessness must take place within two distinct contexts, systemic and tactical. This plan does this by strategizing systemic changes to end homelessness. Community members that attended the Coalition’s annual retreat in October 2001 proposed initiatives and changes to end homelessness within this context. The stakeholders focused on what changes need to be made across the entire community to end homelessness— not just in traditional homeless services, but rather, everything that “feeds” into homeless services or causes (directly or indirectly) people to become homeless. For example, the group recognized that changes need to be made with the mental health system and other systems of care. These systemic changes are an integral part of this local plan.

At the same time, we must decide how to best manage and optimize the current delivery system. This level of planning addresses changes that we can make to best serve those experiencing homelessness in Montgomery County at the present time. This could include programmatic changes, shifting the populations served in various shelters to address current demands and an ongoing assessment of programs and services.

These two levels of planning and change are intertwined. We must and will continue to serve people as they enter homelessness at the same time we develop the infrastructure to help them exit. Both processes need the support and participation of high-level government officials with the authority, and the will, to make positive change. Some of

² National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2001: Growing Wage-Rent Disparity*, 2001, www.nlihc.org.

the same resources are required for each process and both processes should be driven by data, as anecdotal evidence is not enough.

In order to end homelessness, we need better data. It is true that we know a great deal about homelessness in Montgomery County, from years of providing services to people experiencing homelessness, the one-day censuses that we conduct every year as part of the Continuum of Care process, and the development of our Homeless Management Information System. However, in order to achieve real strategic change that ends homelessness, we need better data, data that informs us every step of the way. In Objective D, we advocate for comprehensive assessment of the current system of care for people experiencing homelessness. This must include better data collection that will help us make the case for the needs of homeless adults and children.

Montgomery County children are homeless, too.

The needs and issues of the more than 325 children experiencing homelessness in the County deserve special attention in our quest to end homelessness. These children have unique vulnerabilities that need to be assessed. Homeless children generally experience more health problems and inadequate access to medical care more than housed children. Their health may be compromised in many ways: unhealthy living conditions, lack of preventive and routine care, delayed treatment, and poor nutrition.³

Homeless children also experience a great deal of stress and trauma as a result of their families' economic struggles. This frequently results in developmental and emotional problems. These effects manifest themselves in the classrooms of Montgomery County. Additionally, across the nation over one-fifth of homeless children do not attend school—this is in spite of state and federal efforts to improve access to school for homeless children. We must ensure that every homeless child in our community has access to steady and quality education. And, most importantly, we must work to decrease the number of children experiencing homelessness.

“Housing First” to End Homelessness

The “housing first” philosophy is intrinsic to “Beginning to End”; therefore, this plan emphasizes housing. “Housing first” means permanent supportive housing (housing with services) for the chronically homeless. For less disabled people and families, “housing first” means moving them into permanent housing with links to services very quickly. As the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) asserts, “People should not spend years in homeless systems, either in shelter or in transitional housing.”⁴

³ Better Homes Fund, *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts*, 1999.

⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness, *A Plan to End Homelessness- How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*, 2000, www.naeh.org .

Montgomery County Will...

Our plan focuses on the activities and commitments necessary to end homelessness. The systemic plan is organized into 6 objectives and corresponding actions and steps. The objectives are to:

- Increase the stock of affordable and subsidized housing for all of our County's citizens;
- Improve wages and wage supports so that people can afford housing and provide better support services for economically disadvantaged people;
- Stop the flow of people into homelessness from other systems of care;
- Develop appropriate community resources for people needing treatment for mental health or addictive disorder;
- Reduce barriers to people exiting homelessness quickly; and
- Raise public awareness about homelessness, its prevalence in Montgomery County, its impact and potential solutions.

"We can do this!"

These objectives, and accompanying actions, comprise an ambitious plan – but that is what a problem of this magnitude requires. It demands commitment and action on the part of stakeholders across the community— government, the private sector, community-based nonprofits, and private citizens. These actions will range from changing zoning laws in order to open the doors to affordable housing construction and rehabilitation, to changing policies and procedures that result in homelessness.

The plan means that stakeholders will talk to people with whom they do not usually do business. It means that our actions will match our words saying that homelessness is unacceptable. All of this must happen if we are to overcome the problem of homelessness.

The Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless and its member organizations look forward to working with the County Executive, County Council, Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Community Affairs, the Housing Opportunities Commission, Montgomery Housing Partnership, other nonprofit housing providers, corporations, nonprofit human services providers, health care advocates and providers, criminal justice system, faith community, civic community, mental health system, developers, and every citizen of Montgomery County.

**We can, must and will end homelessness in Montgomery County.
Join us in making this happen.**



Objectives, Action and Associated Steps

A. Increase the stock of affordable and subsidized housing for all of our County's citizens.

Action: The County Executive should declare a housing crisis for special needs housing and low/moderate income housing (by 1/03).

Step: The County Executive should appoint and fund a high-level interagency housing workgroup that will identify publicly owned land for development into affordable housing and will oversee the mandate to increase the stock of affordable and subsidized housing (by 2/03).

- Workgroup members will include heads of the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC), Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

Step: The County Executive should appoint ad hoc Community Housing Crisis Response Team to monitor efforts of interagency housing workgroup and zoning review groups (see below) (by 2/03).

Action: Support and/or develop alternative housing models that serve people at 10-20% of the poverty line.

Step: Develop 100 new housing units per year (2002-2012).

Action: Identify and advocate for changes in housing/zoning laws and policies that impede development of affordable/subsidized housing.

Step: Convene group consisting of zoning experts, civic associations and interested parties to complete review of existing zoning laws and policies (by 2/03).

Step: Group to make recommendations to County Council Planning, Housing, and Economic Development committee for change to current laws to encourage development by (5/03)

Action: Identify and advocate for incentives to develop affordable/subsidized housing including incentives for small landlords and for developers who convert larger buildings into Personal Living Quarters (PLQs).

Step: Hold focus groups with developers and small landlords to identify issues impeding development of affordable/subsidized housing and to identify incentives (by 2/03).

Step: Make recommendations to Interagency Housing Workgroup (by 5/03).

Action: Build support for inclusive communities by working with other community groups.

Step: Recruit other groups interested in housing to strengthen the Alliance for Housing Action (AHA); including, but not limited to, Action in Montgomery (AIM), Progressive Montgomery, groups concerned with housing for individuals with special needs and disabilities, and faith-based organizations to coordinate efforts to increase inclusive communities (MCCH, ongoing).

B. Improve wages and work supports so that people can afford housing and provide better support services for economically disadvantaged and disabled people.

Action: Support efforts to increase national minimum wage.

Step: Monitor federal actions and send legislative alerts to interested parties to encourage contacts with legislators (MCCH; Immediate and ongoing).

Step: Interested parties contact federal legislators to support campaign (Ongoing).

Action: Support efforts to provide a living wage at state and local levels.

Step: Monitor legislative actions and send alerts to interested parties to encourage contacts with legislators (MCCH; immediate and ongoing).

Action: Improve and increase job training programs that provide skills that earn a livable wage.

Step: Form advocacy relationship with Workforce Development Corporation to increase resources for hard to place clients (MCCH; schedule meeting by 9/02).

Step: Hold an informational program on available job training programs (MCCH; by 12/02).

Step: Stakeholders will convene to identify gaps and propose improvements to County Council and County government (by 3/03).

Action: Support programs that provide health care to low-wage earners.

Step: Monitor legislation at the state level and send legislative alerts to interested parties to encourage contacts with legislators (Responsible entity to be identified; immediate and ongoing).

Action: Maximize federal, state, and county earned income tax credit for low-wage earners.

Step: Ongoing advocacy (Responsible entity to be identified; immediate and ongoing).

Step: Education (Responsible entity to be identified; immediate and ongoing).

Action: Encourage state provision of extended unemployment benefits in times of economic recession.

Action: Support child care subsidies for working families.

Step: County should continue to structure child care subsidy program to augment state resources.

Step for above actions: Partner with County's legislative staff person.

Action: Improve transportation system for lower income people to 1) address realities of commuting and 2) provide transportation subsidies.

Action: Provide longer and deeper rental subsidies as safety net housing assistance.

C. Prevent entry to homelessness.

Action: Partner with other systems of care to ensure adequate transitional housing models with goals of long-term housing placement.

➤ Partner with discharge planners from *jails, prisons, and juvenile justice facilities* to ensure people are not discharged into homelessness and to ensure people are job ready when exiting criminal justice system.

➤ Partner with discharge planners from *hospitals* to ensure people are not discharged into homelessness.

➤ Partner with discharge planners from the *child welfare and foster care system* to ensure people are not discharged into homelessness.

➤ Partner with discharge planners from *mental health facilities* to ensure people are not discharged into homelessness.

Step: Meet with representatives from each system of care mentioned above to discuss plans of action (MCCH and interested parties; by 12/02).

Step: Begin measuring percentages of people entering homeless service system from each of the other systems of care (County HHS; by 9/02).

Action: Review existing county policies to make sure they are not inadvertently causing homelessness.

Step: Interagency Housing Workgroup to review internal county policies and make any recommendations for policy changes (by 5/03).

Action: Prevent evictions.

Step: Develop early warning system for customers at risk of losing housing by working with landlords to contact appropriate agencies prior to eviction and when potential to maintain housing may still exist (Responsible entity to be identified; ongoing).

Step: Develop an inter-agency early warning notification system for potential evictions between sheriff's office and county emergency services (Responsible entity to be identified; ongoing).

Step: Provide better in-home supports to help people maintain housing by advocating for case managers to work with housed families at risk of homelessness with the goal of maintaining current housing (MCCH with interested parties; on-going).

D. Reduce barriers to people exiting homelessness quickly.

Action: Assess current system of care for people experiencing homelessness.

Step: Conduct comprehensive assessment of current system utilizing improved data collection. The assessment will include identification of gaps and recommendations for change (Operations Subcommittee of the Homeless Policy Development Committee; by 6/03).

- The one-day census should be changed to elicit better data on the characteristics and needs of homeless *children*.

Action: Develop a “housing first” model in the County that moves people directly into housing with supports following.

Step: Identify a lead nonprofit agency to pilot a housing first model (by 7/03).

Action: Review and revise current policies that make entry into housing difficult.

Step: Interagency Housing Workgroup will review current policies and make recommendations for changes (by 12/03).

Action: Assist people experiencing homelessness in navigating rental market and with problems securing housing.

Step: Provide housing counselors who act as liaison for customers with rental companies and/or landlords (MCCH, HOC; by 9/02).

E. Develop appropriate community resources for people needing treatment for mental health or substance abuse.

Action: Support the mental health community in developing a continuum of housing options for people with mental illness.

Step: Using the AHA continuum of housing needs as a guide, encourage providers of mental health housing to develop the range of housing needed including skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, group homes, residential crisis stabilization centers, personal care homes, foster care, natural family placement, satellite housing, and independent living (AHA; ongoing).

Action: Support the addiction community in developing appropriate housing for treatment of people with addictive disorders.

Step: Meet with addiction community (MCCH and interested parties; by 4/03).

F. Raise public awareness about homelessness, its prevalence in Montgomery County, its impact and potential solutions.

Action: Encourage accurate portrayals of the existence and depth of the problem of homelessness in the County by developing relationships with the local media.

Step: Contact local papers about running a series (at least one story a month) about homelessness or services/programs (MCCH; 12/02).

Step: Contact radio stations to run PSA's about homelessness in Montgomery County and appear on talk radio (MCCH; Speakers Bureau; 2/03).

Action: Educate children and adults about homelessness.

Step: Develop speakers bureau from membership (MCCH; by 7/02)

Step: Contact schools and community groups to arrange speaking dates (MCCH, Speakers Bureau; ongoing).

Action: Continue advocacy with community groups, interfaith community, nonprofits neighborhood groups to counter NIMBYism ("not in my backyard").

Step: Contact civic associations, community groups and congregations to engage community in need for housing (MCCH, interested parties; ongoing).

Action: Raise awareness in and work with business community.

Step: Speak at Chambers of Commerce to develop relationships (MCCH, Speakers Bureau, by 6/03).

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