

Increasing Federal Funding For Services for Permanent Supportive Housing: Rural Fact Sheet

February 2007

Permanent Supportive Housing Need in Rural America

Homeless people in rural areas are just as likely to have a disability, chronic health condition, mental health illness, or substance use disorder as their counterparts in urban areas. Therefore, service models, although the scale may differ, are translatable to a rural setting. One proven model is permanent supportive housing. Supportive housing is effective because it combines permanent housing with needed services, including mental health and substance abuse treatment, health care, transportation, and employment training. Eastern Kentucky; Cloquet, Minnesota; and Allegan County, Michigan are among the examples of permanent supportive housing sites succeeding in rural America.¹ However, due to the uniqueness of rural areas, program providers can find it difficult to fund permanent supportive housing, especially the necessary case management, transportation, health care and other services needed for success.

Background

Nationwide, 59 million people or 1 in 5 of the US population live in rural areas². Approximately 9 percent of the homeless population resides in rural communities. The primary causes of rural homelessness are lack of affordable housing, inadequate income, and barriers to resources and services. This is exasperated by the fact that poverty rates throughout the country are consistently highest in rural communities, increasing as the communities become more and more rural. Poverty in rural areas remains a persistent and challenging threat to the livelihood of 14 percent or 7.5 million children and adults³.

1 Kentucky Program Details - <http://documents.csh.org/documents/ke/toolkit-ending-homelessness/ky-program-examples.pdf>

Michigan Program Details - <http://documents.csh.org/documents/Communications/MI-AlleganCounty.pdf>

Minnesota Program Details - <http://documents.csh.org/documents/ke/toolkit-ending-homelessness/outreach-center-apts.pdf>

2 According to U.S. Census Bureau(2000)

3 United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2005)

Challenges Rural Communities Face

Traditional definitions and descriptions of homelessness, especially chronic homelessness⁴, are difficult to apply in rural communities. People are more likely to be 'doubled up' or live with family members or friends. In addition, rural areas often lack emergency or transitional shelter which serve as places where homeless people are tracked and their episodes of homelessness counted. If there are not shelters, people are not counted as episodically homeless⁵. Finally, factors such as the fact that there is more alcoholism and less controlled substance use and less severe mental illness in rural areas makes it difficult for people to fit in disability populations that might meet the chronic homeless definition⁶.

Since services for people experiencing homelessness are most often located in cities, the rural homeless population is geographically disadvantaged. Outreach efforts are complicated because the traditional places homeless people congregate are few or non-existent. Rural areas rarely have public transportation so those experiencing homelessness cannot travel to where services might be administered. In addition, a lack of public or affordable housing particularly apartments can complicate rehousing efforts.

Homeless populations in rural areas being unable to utilize these and other services means their needs often go unmet.

Provide More Funding

Increasing funding available for services in permanent supportive housing can help rural areas overcome these challenges. The Grants for the Benefit of Homeless Individuals program within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) can provide communities, including rural areas, a flexible array of services dollars focused on helping people move toward recovery and self-sufficiency. Services would include mental health, substance use treatment, health education and referral, employment, and case management. Most importantly, this funding would be able to be accessed by rural communities and work in conjunction with other federal dollars including those administered by the federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Agriculture (USDA).

Rural communities increasingly need additional resources to assist individuals and families experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness. Increasing services funding for permanent supportive housing programs is an important step toward ending homelessness everywhere in America.

4 To meet the definition of chronic homelessness a person must have a disabling condition and either have been homeless for longer than one year or had 4 or more episodes of homelessness in the past 3 years

5 U.S. Department of Agriculture: Rural Homelessness: Focusing on the Needs of the Rural Homeless, 1996. .

6 Van Gundy, Karen, Substance Abuse in Rural and Small Town America, Carsey Institute, 2006.