

Coming Home

The Athens County Plan to End Homelessness

Introduction

Homelessness in Athens County is largely a hidden problem. Strong family norms that often include caring for one's own are prevalent in our Appalachian corner of the state, making those without a permanent residence difficult to quantify. Traditionally, methods of enumerating a community's homeless problem have reflected urban characteristics; volunteers scour city streets with clipboards, searching underpasses, park benches, and tent cities.

Amid the hills of the Appalachians that surround our community, our neighbors without homes are often under a roof, yet insecure in their housing. A homeless family or individual may be living in a car or sleeping in a bunk in an emergency shelter. They are more likely, however, to be "doubled up" in overcrowded housing, sleeping on a friend's or relative's couch. Others may be precariously housed in a dilapidated trailer on borrowed land or in a low-cost motel. Oftentimes, those in such scenarios are not considered to be homeless by official federal definitions that govern many homelessness programs. Rural counties often struggle with these restrictions, with the knowledge that our persons and families in need look different than the popularly held image of *homeless*.

Coming Home is the culmination of a planning effort by homeless service providers, housing developers, and community leaders. It provides a long-range look at the housing needs of those who are homeless and of those who are at-risk of homelessness. The goal of this plan is to see an end to homelessness in Athens County, through a series of steps and objectives that are tailored to the rural nature of our homelessness problem. Specifically, we hope to achieve the following:

- *Close the front door to homelessness.* This plan aims to prevent future homelessness through increased assistance to those at-risk of homelessness, improved discharge planning from public institutions, volunteer coordination, and staff committed to stabilizing at-risk people in housing.
- *Open the back door to homelessness.* This plan calls for the development of additional permanent housing units for the homeless. As the number of housing options for low-income individuals continues to decline, the plan calls for a community priority to be placed on housing those among us who are most vulnerable to homelessness.

- *Build capacity.* For many of the homeless residents of Athens County, unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and unstable work histories are significant barriers to stable housing. Recognizing the inextricable link between poverty and homelessness, this plan addresses the need for increased employment opportunity and support and offers a plan to achieve this.

The Athens County Housing Coalition

In response to eligibility criteria set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Athens County Housing Coalition first began meeting in 1998 as the Athens County Continuum of Care. The initial purpose of the group was to support the submission of a Shelter Plus Care grant for funding the development of a five-unit apartment building for people who are both homeless and experiencing a dual-diagnosis of substance abuse and mental illness. Following grant funding and the eventual completion of this project, several participating agencies continued to meet. Since then, the group has adopted by-laws, a mission statement, and a new name: the Athens County Housing Coalition (ACHC). In addition, the Coalition has been awarded over \$1.5 million for housing and homelessness assistance projects.

Throughout 2006, the ACHC has been embarking on an exciting new phase of homelessness planning as a part of the Rural Housing Initiative of Southeast Ohio, with a planning grant from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations. Several Coalition members have been meeting monthly as a planning group to identify the priorities of Athens County in addressing the housing needs of the homeless and those at-risk of homelessness. The larger group continues to meet on a quarterly basis.

In keeping with the trend of numerous other communities throughout the country, Athens County has the vision of changing the framework of the homelessness conversation from one of *managing* the problem to that of *ending* it. To get there, the ACHC has engaged a number of stakeholders to inform our community about our efforts, to glean perspectives and experience on what homelessness in Athens County looks like, and to garner support for our plan.

Athens County and Rural Poverty

Often the poorest of the state's 88 counties, Athens is a part of Appalachian Ohio and is predominantly rural. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, 27.4% of Athens County residents had incomes below the poverty line in 2000, well above the rate of Ohio, at 10.6%.

Rural poverty presents a number unique characteristics and challenges. The scarcity of jobs, goods, and services has caused an outward migration of rural populations to places with more opportunities. As a consequence, the rural communities with high rates of poverty are sparsely populated and their poverty populations are severely in need.

High rates of unemployment and *underemployment* in rural areas also drive homelessness. Rural homelessness is most dramatic in areas that experience high rates of unemployment because of declining industries, for example farming, timber, mining, or fishing. (Aron and Fitchen, 1996) The lack of available jobs and steady incomes means that poverty rates are higher in rural areas; the poverty rate in non-metropolitan areas is 14 percent, almost 11.6 percent less than in metropolitan areas. It is not surprising that one in five children living in rural areas is below the poverty line. (USDA Economic Research Service, 2004)

Community Participation

Athens County is fortunate to have a number of agencies, programs, and individuals committed to serving the homeless and at-risk. To at least a limited degree, the County has services for each of the components of the Continuum of Care as required by HUD: outreach, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing. Staff from area agencies providing each of these components have been active participants of the Continuum of Care. Representatives from four agencies have committed significant time and energy to homelessness planning: Athens Metropolitan Housing Authority, Good Works, Inc., Rural Appalachian Housing Development, and the Athens, Hocking, Vinton 317 Board.

Building Political Will

The Athens County Housing Coalition held a luncheon for area stakeholders on September 28, 2006, at the Ohio University Inn. With a goal of welcoming 25 community members to this event, the group was excited to greet a total of about 45 participants. Most importantly, the luncheon was attended by numerous parties who had not previously been engaged in the planning process, including county commissioners, county planners, university faculty, agency directors, bank staff, a realtor, and city council members. The purpose of this luncheon, in part, was to hear comments from the community on perspectives of homelessness and housing in Athens County, to inform participants of the county plan, and to include additional groups, agencies, and institutions in the plan.

The stakeholder luncheon included 45-minute breakout sessions that engaged participants in a conversation about community perceptions of homelessness and affordable housing needs. These groups were formed around our three priority areas of increased housing stock for homeless individuals and families and those at-risk, economic development, and homelessness prevention. At the luncheon, attendees were asked to commit to a limited duration to discuss how our county will address these priority areas, by meeting twice more. An Athens County Housing Coalition member is leading each of these groups. The hope for these meetings is to engage additional agencies and community members in exploring new initiatives for identified priority areas. These groups have included several area agencies and other entities such as schools and local government, each of whom regularly serve homeless individuals or families.

Coordination

The Athens County Housing Coalition continues to seek increased coordination among service providers by encouraging participation in quarterly meetings. The last quarterly meeting of 2006 saw a healthy attendance and training on the county's new Shelter Plus Care program.

Further coordination efforts are made through quarterly meetings with agencies participating in the Shelter Plus Care program. Agencies offering services to participants in the Substance Abuse/Mental Illness (SAMI) housing program meet twice a month for coordination.

Goals and Objectives

The Athens County Housing Coalition has identified the following goals and objectives for the current plan.

1. Increase the housing stock in Athens County for the homeless and at-risk, with an emphasis on growth in the city limits

Objective 1. Pursue the donation of land from Ohio University to develop permanent housing units for those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. Ohio University has recently granted a large parcel of land for the development of senior citizen housing in an Athens neighborhood. The ACHC seeks a similar donation for the development of housing for those who are homeless.

Objective 2. Increase the number of vouchers in order to provide a range of subsidies for various levels of need. Athens County has been awarded 25 Shelter Plus Care vouchers for residents with a disability. We are in need of varying types of such vouchers to serve a variety of populations.

Objective 3. Explore partnerships with the city and other entities to obtain additional properties to be rehabilitated for permanent housing for homeless individuals and those at-risk of homelessness.

Objective 4. Increase the amount of transitional housing and shelter space available for families.

Objective 5. Landlord Outreach. The ACHC will explore how to increase the number of local landlords with units available for low-income and homeless individuals and families and to maintain a roster of participants.

Objective 6. Address substandard housing by exploring funding to maintain units already serving our county's low-income residents.

Objective 7. Develop housing solutions for ex-offenders.

2. Encourage economic development in Athens County in a way that will benefit those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless

Objective 1. Continue the Good Job program at Good Works by creating a staff position to develop public/private partnerships with area employers who will accept homeless individuals for supported positions.

Objective 2. Develop small businesses that will employ homeless residents.

3. Prevent homelessness from occurring through increased assistance to people who are at-risk of becoming homeless

Objective 1. Advocate for an increase in the amount of emergency assistance provided to Athens County residents who are at-risk of becoming homeless.

Objective 2. Collaborate with hospitals, jails, and treatment centers for better coordination of discharge planning from these institutions.

Objective 3. Develop a staff position responsible for stabilizing at-risk individuals in housing. This person would be able to troubleshoot issues that could lead to eviction and would work with landlords and other collaborating agencies.

Objective 4. Harness community volunteers to increase involvement of local community members in the homeless population.

Data and Research

Point in Time Count

The most recent point in time data for Athens County is from the January 2005 count. It is recognized that many other members of our community are experiencing homelessness but, due to various factors, are not included in this data.

Homeless individuals: 30	Homeless subpopulations:
Persons in homeless families with children: 37	Chronically homeless: 22
<u>Total:</u> 67	Severely mentally ill: 20
	Chronic substance abuse: 10
	Veterans: 5
	Victims of domestic violence: 2
	Youth (under 18): 3

Athens County currently has the following housing and shelter options available to people who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless.

Emergency beds	15
Domestic violence beds	10
Transitional housing units	7
Permanent supported housing units	30

Workforce Development and Employment Support Research

As a part of the RHISCO planning process, the Athens County Housing Coalition has been working with a consultant from the Ohio University School of Communication, in part, to conduct research on the following:

- Consumers' experiences in the workplace and the interventions, education, and training they have experienced.

- How agencies and organizations envision creating a “net of collective action” with others addressing the needs of the homeless
- Identifying and recruiting work resources in wide-ranging aspects of the economy who might be willing partners in fighting homelessness

The consultant will be submitting a report on the realities of the homeless of SE Ohio as they reenter the world of work, on the for-profit/non-profit working dynamics of those serving/employing the homeless, and on the inter-organizational dynamics of various groups helping those in poverty with work issues. This work will seek to create better understanding and cooperation between these organizations, such as the Work Station, BVR, Good Works, Inc. and for-profit businesses in order to more effectively and collaboratively address the employment support needs of those experiencing homelessness.

Research on the Athens County Continuum of Care and the Needs of Area Homeless

A current ACHC member conducted a graduate social work research project in 2006 to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the Continuum of Care in Athens County. In this study, participants expressed that the greatest need of the Athens County homeless is increased access to affordable housing. Participants named transitional housing as the weakest component of the Continuum of Care. Participants cited a livable wage as a critical component to successful strategies addressing homelessness.

Athens County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Athens County is currently developing a comprehensive land use plan that will provide a blueprint for future development through 2030. Four ACHC members are taking part in the housing task force, one of eight involved in the county planning process. The county plan is expected to be completed in 2007.

Community Housing Improvement Strategy

Athens-Hocking-Perry Community Action Program administers the city and county's housing program. Part of that responsibility includes coordinating the Community Housing Improvement Strategy (CHIS) every five years with periodic updates in-between. The CHIS is an analysis of the city and county's demographic and housing needs and strategies to address those needs over a five year period. The next full CHIS will be completed in 2008.

City of Athens Comprehensive Plan

The City of Athens completed a comprehensive plan in 2003. At the time during which the city held a number of events to solicit community input into the plan, the Athens County Housing Coalition was only newly organized and was not in a position to offer data about the needs and extent of low income householders need in the city. While the Comprehensive Plan has a benchmark to expand housing choices "in all price ranges", it is not clear that this means maintenance and development of affordable housing for very low-income individuals and families. Because low-income individuals and families often lack access to private transportation, it is vital to develop more rental housing in the city of Athens. The ACHC is very interested in partnering with the City Council and administration on this goal and believes that with a collaborative effort, change can be affected in this area.

Prevention

The Athens County Housing Coalition understands that preventing homelessness is a critical component of ending it. Preventing future cases of homelessness is one of the three priority areas selected by the Athens County Housing Coalition. Currently, the following measures are in place to prevent people from becoming homeless:

- **Athens County Department of Job and Family Services:** Prevention, Retention, and Contingency (PRC) funds
- **Tri-County Mental Health:** rent and mortgage assistance
- **Local churches:** rent and mortgage assistance
- **Hocking-Athens-Perry Community Action:** emergency home repair and utility payment

- **Department of Veterans Affairs:** assistance with rent, mortgage, and utilities
- **Athens County and City of Athens:** Community Housing Improvement Program (CHIP)
- **Rural Appalachian Housing Development:** emergency home repair
- **Athens Metropolitan Housing Authority:** rental assistance

To strengthen these efforts and to bridge identified gaps in prevention services, the Coalition has set the following objectives as part of our plan for preventing future homelessness:

1. **Advocate for an increase in the amount of emergency assistance provided to Athens County residents who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless.**

Emergency funds for people unable to make a rent or mortgage payment can actively prevent a new case of homelessness. Working as a foot in the “revolving door” of homelessness, such funds can greatly impact the lives of persons and families in crisis, often in a more efficient manner than when problems are allowed to develop into full-blown homelessness.

2. **Collaborate with hospitals, jails, and treatment centers for better coordination of discharge planning from these institutions.**

It is critical that systems such as these develop and follow guidelines to ensure that those discharged will not be released to the street. The ACHC plans to engage representatives from these institutions in conversation regarding discharge policies and procedures.

3. **Develop a staff position responsible for stabilizing at-risk individuals in housing.**

This person would be able to troubleshoot issues that could lead to eviction and could serve as a point person for landlords or agencies.

4. **Harness community volunteers to increase involvement of local community members in the homeless population.**

The population of Athens County includes a number of people with a concern and compassion for those in difficult circumstances. The Coalition recognizes the importance of this resource and hopes to take full advantage of a present willingness to assist agency efforts.

Outreach

The following measures are currently in place as outreach activities for those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless, as well as to educate our community about housing issues:

- **Walk for the Homeless:** Each January, Good Works, Inc. conducts an event to educate the public (children, youth and adults) about the reality of homelessness and poverty in southeastern Ohio and to generate needed financial support for the Good Works Timothy House.
- **Homeless Count:** Also in January, the Athens County Housing Coalition will be conducting a point-in-time count to capture the number of individuals and families facing homelessness throughout the county.
- **Stakeholders Luncheon:** In September, the Athens County Housing Coalition invited community members to have lunch and to hear about homelessness planning being conducted through the Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio. Around 45 were in attendance and were given an opportunity to reflect on homelessness as it appears in our rural county. This type of event may be repeated in the future.
- **Friday Night Life Program:** Each Friday evening, Good Works hosts a free meal and evening of programming that is open to all community members. This event includes discussion groups, special visitors and seminars. This program operates during the same time as Kid's Club, which offers children's activities after the meal. Although not a formal outreach activity, this program consistently provides shelter residents, those in vulnerable populations, and the community at-large an opportunity to meet one another and to eat a meal together. The recent addition of a health clinic provides information and basic health care to those who attend FNL.
- **Department of Veterans Affairs Outreach:** Homeless veterans in Athens County are served by the Homeless Coordinator at the Chillicothe VA Medical Center in Chillicothe, Ohio. The Coordinator makes contact with veterans who are homeless and may not be aware of the resources that are available. Through this program, homeless veterans are connected to VA resources as well as to community resources.

Workforce Development/ Job Support

Workforce development is one of the three priority areas selected by the Athens County Housing Coalition. Currently, the following agencies are providing support to people in the workplace or are creating employment opportunities for those who are homeless or in a vulnerable population:

- Appalachian People's Action Coalition
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Personnel Plus
- Workstation (Department of Job and Family Services)
- Work Experience Program (Department of Job and Family Services)
- Tri-County Joint Vocational School
- Athens Metropolitan Housing Family Self Sufficiency Program
- Integrated Service Systems

The ACHC aims to encourage economic development in Athens County in a way that will benefit those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that nearly one in five adults is unemployed in Athens County.

Our hope is to create and support employment opportunities for those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless, primarily through the Good Job program and through small businesses created to employ persons in this population. The program seeks to bridge the gap between meeting the emergency needs of the homeless and sending them out to find work.

The ACHC has set the following objectives to address employment:

- 1. Continue the Good Job program at Good Works by creating a staff position to develop public/private partnerships with area employers who will accept homeless individuals for supported positions.**

The Good Job program is recruiting partners from for-profit businesses in Athens to provide employment, training, and support to homeless persons as they work in these places of employment. Area agencies such as Good Works, BVR, and the Work Station rarely, if ever, are equipped or able to follow clients into the for-profit world of work, especially on the relatively short notice demanded by the emergency needs of the homeless. Yet, the workplace is where

the homeless often sink or swim economically and socially. This program seeks to bridge the non-profit/for-profit gap by working with employers to ready people for work and support them as they endeavor to succeed at work while battling the many difficulties in their lives.

One possible model for this program is the Grameen Bank, which uses small group support and accountability coupled with work and business opportunity to help the poorest of the poor.

Good Works would also like to increase its program that enables people in the community to trade volunteer/work hours for a vehicle. This program released 15 cars in 2006 and Good Works would like to see this number doubled in 2007. The program is in need of additional donated vehicles as well as staffing for administration.

2. Develop small businesses that will employ homeless residents.

The ACHC supports the development of sustainable employment opportunities to be created by Good Works. Currently, the agency is exploring multiple business ventures and is seeking expert partners, such as the Ohio University College of Business, to create sustainable employment that can offer work and provide training opportunities for the homeless, as they also help build community.

Specifically, Good Works is considering opening a quick oil change and a coffee/ice cream/bread retail business at Good Works' Hannah House property.

Shorten Homelessness

The Athens County Housing Coalition endorses the Housing First philosophy and works to see a time when homeless individuals and families are able to quickly acquire safe, decent, and affordable housing. However, a severe lack of housing stock that is affordable for these persons is a critical barrier to this goal. To this end, the ACHC is planning for several levels and types of permanent housing for homeless and at-risk populations. Developing additional units is central to our efforts of shortening the time that people are without homes. These efforts are further described under the permanent housing section of this plan.

Rental and deposit assistance programs are lacking in Athens County. This may be one way of addressing the length of time that individuals and families are experiencing homelessness.

Permanent Housing

The Athens County Housing Coalition has chosen increasing the housing stock in Athens County for the homeless and at-risk as a priority area for homelessness planning. The Coalition specifically will work toward growth within the city limits. The objectives for this priority area include:

1. Landlord outreach;

The ACHC will explore how to increase the number of local landlords with units available for low-income and homeless individuals and families and to maintain a roster of participants. Several in the county have expressed a willingness to make units available for these populations.

2. Increasing the number of vouchers in order to provide a range of subsidies for various levels of need;

Athens County has been awarded 25 Shelter Plus Care vouchers for residents with a disability. We are in need of varying types of such vouchers to serve a variety of populations.

3. Exploring partnerships with the city and other entities to obtain additional properties to be rehabilitated for permanent housing for homeless individuals and those at-risk of homelessness;

Members of the Athens County Housing Coalition have identified the need for additional homes within the city limits of Athens. The relative high cost of housing in the city drives many of the homeless and at-risk into the county, where services are scarce. A lack of transportation can compound access problems.

4. Increasing the amount of transitional housing available for families

In a graduate research study conducted in 2006, the most commonly cited weakness of the Athens Continuum of Care was transitional housing. This study found that our emergency shelter often sees lengthier stays because of a lack in this Continuum component. A participant in this study observed that a lack of transitional housing also places a particular burden on those being released from hospitals or other institutions that have no home to return to.

An opportunity has arisen to possibly purchase a house neighboring our county's emergency shelter. The shelter has expressed interest in purchasing this house to provide additional transitional housing units for homeless families.

5. Pursuing the donation of land from Ohio University to develop permanent housing units for those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless;

Ohio University has recently granted a large parcel of land for the development of senior citizen housing in an Athens neighborhood. The ACHC is seeking a similar donation for the development of housing for those who are homeless.

6. Addressing substandard housing by exploring funding to maintain units already serving our county's low-income residents;

Oftentimes, persons or families that have been able to secure housing find that they are unable to afford the upkeep to their new homes, leaving potentially dangerous repairs unattended. Substandard housing presents a serious risk to many on the verge of becoming homeless. To prevent new cases of homelessness, the Coalition seeks new opportunities for funding maintenance projects for low-income households.

7. Developing housing units for ex-offenders.

In a graduate research study conducted in 2006, participants were asked to name subpopulations currently underserved by the Continuum of Care. Ex-offenders were one group named in this research, as this population is often not eligible for publicly funded housing units.

Implementation and Next Steps

The Athens County Housing Coalition is continuing discussions on the details of the implementation plan and what resources may be explored for future funding opportunities. With the understanding that the plan is a living document, the Coalition sees the need for additional discussions before the document will be ready for implementation. Further development is needed on stated objectives of the plan, including the identification of lead agencies for each, as well as costs and possible funding sources. Coalition members will be exploring a number of possible resources, including federal, state, and local funds.

The following page shows a tool that has been developed for organization of the plan's next steps. Upcoming meetings of the Coalition will be dedicated, in part, to developing these homelessness planning strategies.

Implementing the Plan

Plan Objective	Lead Agency	Cost (low, med., high)	Possible Funding Sources
Advocate for an increase in the amount of emergency assistance			
Collaborate for better coordination of discharge planning from institutions			
Staff position responsible for stabilizing at-risk individuals in housing			
Harness community volunteers			
Staff position for the Good Job Program			
Develop small businesses			
Landlord outreach			
Increase number of vouchers for a range of subsidies			
Explore partnerships with the city and other entities for additional properties to be rehabilitated			
Increase amount of transitional housing			
Pursue donation of land from OU for permanent units			
Address substandard housing by exploring funding to maintain existing units			
Developing housing units for ex-offenders.			