

Homeless on the Peninsula: Fixing the Problem Before it Gets Worse

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NEWPORT NEWS — Homelessness represents a crisis on the Peninsula, and new strategies are needed to more effectively address the problem, say agencies and city officials tackling the problem.

"Now that we have this crisis and people know that it might be their neighbor or could be a relative, people are more interested in talking about it and becoming engaged," Newport News Assistant City Manager Alan K. Archer said.

Archer and Joy Cipriano, director of the Hampton-Newport News Community Services Board, say the homelessness problem was getting better before it got worse this year, a reversal they attribute to the recession.

A count taken in January indicated the number of homeless people on the Peninsula has risen to 569, an increase of just over 8 percent.

From 2005 to 2008, however, the number of homeless people recorded in annual counts for the Virginia Peninsula Regional Plan to End Homelessness fell from 1,034 to 526, a drop of 49 percent, in Newport News, Hampton, Poquoson, Williamsburg, York County and James City County, the six localities that form the Commission on Homelessness.

The Greater Virginia Peninsula Continuum of Care Council, along with the Commission on Homelessness, drafted a 10-year plan to combat homelessness on the Peninsula.

"The 10-year plan is a long-range plan for improving the region's homeless services," Archer said. "This effort will enable the participating jurisdictions to implement a proactive approach to the issue of homelessness that will reduce the scope of the problem."

The report calls for five strategies to end homelessness:

- Homelessness prevention through the creation of broker teams which help homeless families draft lease agreements with landlords, development of housing support centers, ex-offender programs and coordinating resources.
- Permanent housing through an inventory of affordable housing, changed housing policies and funding of affordable housing development.
- Appropriate/coordinated/individualized services through "one-stop shopping" regional service centers that can work in collaboration.
- Education and public awareness and improvements to public and private systems.
- Systems change from elected and appointed officials, transparency within governments and the creation of a regional entity focused solely on the homeless.

The report — which is available online at www.vapeninsulahomeless.org/ archives — acknowledges the "challenges, successes and setbacks" in combating homelessness, but Sarah Meacham, executive director of Williamsburg-based Avalon, a center for women and children who are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, recognizes that all these recommendations are contingent on funding.

Archer said most of the homeless are found in Newport News and Hampton. But the amount of resources dedicated to helping the homeless on the Peninsula is "probably not" sufficient, he said.

More than \$1.5 million will flow into the Peninsula from federal and local sources, but pinpointing how that money is spent is difficult. Most of the money comes to Newport News, where many homeless services are concentrated.

Depending on who is asked, there are different views on how money can be best spent to help the homeless.

Newport News has lost two shelters in recent years — the Friends of the Homeless shelter on 25th Street and a Salvation Army shelter. But new facilities aren't on the agenda, and there is debate about their effectiveness.

"A shelter is not a long-term solution. In fact, it's not even a good short-term solution," Cipriano said.

She said emergency beds do not help tackle the homelessness problem.

A report drawn up for the Virginia Peninsula Mayors and Chairs in 2005 when the homeless count exceeded 1,000 pointed to a shortfall of emergency beds. In the last few years, however, there has been a "huge underutilization of shelters," Cipriano said.

Part of the problem is that some homeless people are not eligible to stay at the centers. Until recently, families including a male child over 12 were unable to access the domestic violence shelters on the Peninsula.

The only permanent shelter on the Peninsula, the Peninsula Rescue Mission in Newport News, is for single men only.

Other shelters are only temporary and have restrictions on who is allowed in. For example, there are shelters in Hampton, Newport News and Williamsburg that are available for women and children who are victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse on a case-by-case basis. Some Hampton and Newport News churches open their doors to the homeless, but only during the winter and spring.

Cipriano said putting funding into emergency shelters can be a waste of money.

"If you are going to have scarce resources, you want to put them where they are going to have the most impact in ending somebody's homelessness. It's not going to happen in an emergency shelter."

Shelters that are staffed have their supporters, however.

Lynne Finding, executive director of LINK, a coalition of church congregations that provides shelter for homeless people, questions the effectiveness of accommodating homeless people in hotels and motels and favors a staffed shelter.

"In my opinion, you don't get to see what's going on in the household, so you don't get daily

contact, and you don't get case management like shelter staff. They are pretty much left floating there. When they are in an emergency shelter for 30 or 45 days, you can see what's going on, you can put the players into place and hopefully you can move them into housing fairly quickly," she said.

The Community Services Board supports the provision of permanent housing, Cipriano said.

"If you can prevent them becoming homeless, it's cheaper and better on the family."

The Community Services Board has been working on permanent support housing in scattered sites in a program supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"They don't get stuck in an emergency center that's going to close down in 20 weeks or not be open after 7 a.m.," Cipriano said.

But permanent support housing comes with a "hefty rent subsidy," she said. "It always comes with appropriate individualized support services. You don't just stick them somewhere. You have staff and case workers."

Rents for housing units come in at about \$950 a month. The rent is paid by federal money until the homeless people start earning income.

But Cipriano admits there aren't enough units to meet the scale of the problem. The Community Services Board has about 320 units in Hampton and Newport News.