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SNAPS Weekly Focus Guest Blog: Working Together to End Homelessness

Authors: Martha Kegel, *Executive Director*, UNITY of Greater New Orleans and Stacy Horn Koch, *Director of Homeless Policy*, City of New Orleans

Just a few years ago, New Orleans had one of the nation's highest rates of chronic homelessness. This distressing phenomenon was largely due to the lingering effects of the Hurricane Katrina levee failures in 2005, which wiped out the city's stock of affordable housing, shattered the health and behavioral health systems and scattered the extended family and community networks on which so many vulnerable people once relied. At the height of recovery in 2007, the number of homeless persons in New Orleans skyrocketed to 11,619. Through the hard work of the 63 agencies of the Continuum of Care, UNITY of Greater New Orleans and the City of New Orleans that daunting number has dropped significantly over the years from 8,725 in 2009, to 4,903 in 2012 to our current number 2,337 a 47% decrease from the previous year.

This picture is far more encouraging today. Since 2009, chronic homelessness in New Orleans is down by 85 percent—a decrease from 4,579 to 633 in FY2013. What was unimaginable only a few years ago is now within sight: New Orleans is on track to become one of the first cities to eliminate the long-term homelessness of people with disabilities, in line with the federal plan to end chronic homelessness by 2015.

Key factors that contributed to this sharp reduction in homelessness—targeting, strategy, and partnership—increased access to permanent supportive housing (PSH).

Targeting

In 2008 local and national advocates worked with Senator Mary Landrieu and the state of Louisiana to obtain a special congressional allocation of Permanent Supportive Housing vouchers for hurricane-devastated areas. Instead of giving out those vouchers on a “first-come, first-served” basis, or to those considered “most likely to succeed” in housing – the client selection methods often used in the past -- the Continuum of Care decided to prioritize placement in housing for the most vulnerable people with the longest histories of homelessness using the Vulnerability Index.

A vulnerability survey based on national homeless mortality research was administered to each person, who was then given a score based on their likelihood of dying if left unhoused and the length of time they had been homeless. Additional factors of vulnerability were also taken into consideration including current sleeping location (i.e. in a homeless camp with health-threatening conditions) and history of developmental disabilities or mental health issues. In New Orleans, post disaster, there was a high rate of suicide and scarcity of inpatient psychiatric treatment. Before too long, those assessed as vulnerable by outreach teams and shelter staff added up to a registry of over 1000 disabled homeless persons in need of housing.

Strategy

When Mayor Landrieu took office in May of 2010 he prioritized solving homelessness. In January of 2011, he established an office of Homeless Policy and with support from Federal, State, and local stakeholders with



noteworthy participation from homeless constituents, in 100-days during 2011, the New Orleans Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness was developed. The plan, launched in late 2011, and in line with Federal strategies articulated in Opening Doors, was followed by the Mayor creating the New Orleans Interagency Council on Homelessness (NOICH) which currently provides leadership in developing strategies to prevent and end homelessness.

Partnership

The synergy created by the development of the 10-year plan effort brought new partners to the table and enriched old partnerships to target resources in a more coordinated and strategic manner. Working in harmony, the City of New Orleans, the State of Louisiana, the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care Administration and UNITY (as CoC lead) provided leadership to align resources throughout the State on common objectives to prevent and end homelessness. These partnerships have created hundreds of units of new affordable and permanent supportive housing. The City's recent release of an unprecedented NOFA that links and leverages a cross-section of federal, State and private funding is indicative of the commitment to partnership in ending homelessness.

The City of New Orleans enjoys a very robust partnership with the VA. Strong leadership at the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System made the decision to join the City Ten Year Plan becoming the second VA in the Country to do this. In addition their decision to make chronically homeless Veterans a priority by targeting 85% of VASH vouchers for the chronically homeless, resulted in the housing of hundreds of chronically homeless Veterans in the last two years.

HUD, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, SAMHSA and the state have intensified the on-the-ground work in New Orleans by launching companion initiatives to identify more mainstream housing and services resources for the chronically homeless. The State of Louisiana is an active and engaged partner active on the NOICH and established a homeless preference within its Permanent Supportive Housing Program. Their strong commitment to ending homelessness is further evidenced by the Governor's Executive Order creating the Louisiana Interagency Council on Homelessness earlier in 2013.

Looking Forward

With additional support and involvement in the Louisiana Policy Academy on Chronic Homelessness supported by SAMHSA, the HUD/USICH Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness initiative and participation in Boot Camps, the community has continued to bring resources to solve homelessness in New Orleans. The Continuum is currently in the process of housing 200 chronically homeless persons in 100 days, and is targeting resources to frequent users of emergency medical services, thus renewing the commitment to prioritize housing for persons experiencing chronic homelessness. We aim to keep prioritizing the chronically homeless until the tragedy of people with serious disabilities having to live long term on the street has been ended.