Philadelphia’s Homeless Services System: Where We Are and Where We Are Headed

On January 25, 2017, Philadelphia’s annual Point-in-Time Count showed 5,693 persons experiencing homelessness. This included 825 families with 1,508 children and 844 adults, including 242 parenting youth (ages 18-24). Another 3,315 adults were not accompanied by children, including 271 unaccompanied youth (ages 18-24), with an additional 26 unaccompanied children under the age of 18. High proportions of the adults experiencing homelessness self-reported a serious mental illness or chronic substance use concern, with a substantial number having experience with domestic violence.

Of the total number, 83% were sheltered, meaning that they were staying in emergency housing (shelters) or time-limited transitional housing programs. The 956 unsheltered persons represent an increase in the number sleeping on the streets or staying in overnight cafes, a low-demand alternative to congregate housing for escaping the elements and receiving a cup of coffee or soup. The opioid epidemic appears to be driving this increase, which contrasts with a decrease in the total number of people experiencing homelessness.

Philadelphia’s system of housing and services for people experiencing homelessness encompasses a network of nearly 70 providers, mostly nonprofit, and public sector partners. Over time, as national best practices for ending homelessness have evolved, the system has changed shape. Still, Philadelphia has long recognized that “ending homelessness means creating homes,” as stated in our most recent community-wide strategic plan from 2005.

Towards that end, we have successfully grown the stock of permanent supportive housing (PSH) by 98% since 2005, one of the key strategies for reaching our long-standing aim to “open the ‘back door’ out of homelessness.” The Housing Inventory Chart (HIC) submitted to HUD in January 2017 included 6,179 beds in 3,602 PSH units, long-term housing opportunities with supportive services to assist persons with disabilities to live independently. However, as PSH programs are designed for long-term support, they have fairly low turnover rates. The needs assessment completed by our Unit Projections Subcommittee indicates that we have a system gap of nearly 1,600 PSH units to meet ongoing needs of our community.

Not everyone experiencing homelessness has a disability or needs ongoing assistance to maintain housing stability. Since 2009, thousands of households have received rapid rehousing (RRH) assistance: rental assistance and supportive services on a time-limited basis to assist people to return quickly and stabilize in private market housing. Rapid rehousing programs are significantly more cost-effective than extended shelter stays, and local programs have an 85% success rate in preventing a return to homelessness.

To respond to immediate housing crises, Philadelphia has 3,652 emergency beds available year-round in emergency shelters, with more than 400 additional beds available during the winters.
Another **1,587 transitional housing beds** provide temporary support to youth, people in recovery from substance use disorder, and survivors of domestic violence to facilitate their movement to permanent housing and **85 safe haven beds** allow hard-to-reach persons with severe mental illness, who have been unable or unwilling to engage with supportive services to come in from living on the streets. To ensure that no one in Philadelphia needs to live on the street, emergency housing providers have been working to apply **best practices**, lowering **barriers to entry** and adopting a **trauma-informed** and **housing-focused approach** that allows participant choice in a safe and dignified manner.

Philadelphia has **Street Outreach teams on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.** Each of the 8 teams also regularly traverses the city, building trusting relationships with people staying on the street, with the goal of connecting them directly to permanent housing wherever possible. Recent expansion of daytime engagement center options—including the new permanent **Hub of Hope** being developed in the concourse through a partnership between SEPTA, the Office of Homeless Services, and Project HOME—provide new alternatives to being on the street.

All of these services address the needs of people experiencing homelessness, but Philadelphia has also long prioritized closing the “front door” to homelessness with **prevention** strategies. During the first 10 years of Philadelphia Housing Trust Fund operation (2005-2015), $7.4 million in HTF funds prevented 12,888 persons from experiencing homelessness. The City also dedicates Community Services Block Grant and other funds to this purpose and has **tripled the resources allocated to prevention efforts** in FY18.

The homeless services system receives more than **$95 million in public funds**, apart from private donations received by service providers and millions devoted to the needs of this population by the City Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS), the City Department of Human Services (DHS), and others. **The Office of Homeless Services** has embarked on a **strategic planning process** to guide alignment of efforts and resource allocation in accordance with these principles:

- **Housing First** – housing people quickly, without conditions or participation requirements
- **Housing Focused** – services focused on moving to and maintaining permanent housing
- **Prioritization** – assistance prioritized based on vulnerability and severity of service needs
- **Person-Centered** – a dignified, safe, trauma-informed approach allowing participant choice

The system will continue to focus on increasing the supply of **permanent housing (PSH and RRH)** options and the range of supports available to **prevent homelessness**. With the implementation of our **Coordinated Entry & Assessment-Based Housing Referral System (CEA-BHRS)** in January 2018, individuals and families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness will have access to a streamlined and standardized process that links them to the **appropriate resources** to end their housing crisis. Philadelphia will continue to focus on **System Performance** and to refine our efforts to best meet the needs of Philadelphia’s housing-unstable families, youth, veterans, single adults, and persons experiencing **chronic homelessness**.
Philadelphia’s next 5-Year Plan to make homelessness in **rare, brief, and non-recurring** will:

- Clearly define shared community-wide values, aligning our efforts under a unified vision;
- Quantify the housing and services needed and identify opportunities for system innovation;
- Provide a structure to maximize efficient and strategic use of resources, coordination within and outside the homeless services system, and address the specific needs of all subpopulations; and
- Establish metrics, and performance targets to direct action, with clear processes for monitoring community progress towards our shared goals.

Homeless Services is working with the [Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)](https://www.csh.org), a national expert, to develop this plan, but local expertise of stakeholders who have been served by, work in, interface with, or are otherwise invested in the success of the homeless services system will make the plan actionable and our goals achievable. Those outside the system have valuable perspective from different angles, about potential alliances and relationships that will aid our cause. As we engage in this planning process, we are asking community members about their experiences and their views during a series of input sessions and a Charrette – a working meeting where a limited number of stakeholder representatives will bring all of the feedback that they have gathered from their various constituencies to incorporate into decision-making on recommendations that will frame the plan.

The questions driving our process are:

- What is working well in our approach to address homelessness?
- What barriers and challenges are we failing to see or account for?
- What aren’t we seeing or thinking about that is important to consider?
- What opportunities do we have to innovate and increase effectiveness?
- What does success look like?