

Groups launch bid to end homelessness on Seacoast

9/28/2009 By Jeanné McCartin
news@seacoastonline.com

September 29, 2009 2:00 AM PORTSMOUTH — The United Way of the Greater Seacoast has launched Ending Homelessness Work Group, a new effort aimed at ending homelessness in the region.

"We currently have eight partners at the tables," said Edward Tirrell, senior director of Community Impact at the United Way of the Greater Seacoast. Others involved are Cross Roads House shelter, the Fair Tide Transitional Housing program, city welfare directors, community health centers, Healthcare for the Homeless, Homeless Youth Outreach Program and the Dover Housing Authority.

EHWG's mission is to create a partnership that will develop a regional system for preventing and reducing homelessness and provide permanent housing solutions for homeless individuals and families.

Tirrell said at a recent meeting he was told 72 percent of the area's residents were in a relatively high-income bracket.

"But on the other hand, that's 28 percent that aren't," he said. — And in Strafford County, it's twice what it is in Rockingham; for children under 16, it's three times as high."

In addition, more affluent communities may have a higher, undetected homeless population: people who share homes, homeless teenagers or individuals "couch surfing."

"Because they're not visible doesn't mean they're not there," Tirrell said.

The need for programs related to homelessness in Rockingham and Strafford counties is growing, Tirrell said. Homeless and transitional shelters, emergency shelter programs, city welfare offices, community health centers, the Healthcare for the Homeless program and food pantries are all seeing increased demand.

Tirrell said the EHWG is looking at the "housing-first model."

"The first thing you do is place them in permanent housing, and then wrap them up in services," he said.

Statistics show this model, already in effect in communities throughout the United States, is most effective both for individuals and families as well as community coffers.

"When you actually provide permanent housing, it's cheaper than an emergency shelter, and at the same time the health care (costs) are reduced by 50 percent," Tirrell said. There's also a decrease in emergency room services and 911 calls, also a savings.

"So, doing the right thing is an economically wise thing to do," Tirrell said.

The EHWG will first collect and analyze data on greater Seacoast homelessness. The information will be used in planning, education and fund raising.

"In order to compete with other communities for dollars you have to have a plan," he said. "So we're trying to position ourselves to compete."

The group will map existing resources for homelessness prevention, housing and services and advocate for and create a collaborative regional approach to ending homelessness.

"We have a system with disparate pieces, health care here, a bed there, but no efficient system for intake assessment and placement," Tirrell said. "We want to develop that."

The EHWG will review "best practice" models in both prevention and permanent housing strategies, then develop and implement a strategic plan.

"We want to develop strategic plans to create a regional system that works both to prevent homelessness and provide permanent housing for people ...; and the right services," Tirrell said. "Research shows if you're in a shelter beyond 60 days, families begin to lose hope and energy, get more depressed. If they move out (quicker) data shows outcomes greatly improve."

Joe Galli, executive director of Fair Tide in Kittery, Maine, which offers transitional housing and support services, said his organization already has a success record with collaborative efforts and the support services model. It recently partnered with the **Portsmouth-based Housing Partnership** to share resources.

The real caveat locally is the lack of affordable housing, Galli said, adding it will take strong partnerships to develop more opportunities.

"There's so many families that could benefit if we collaborate," he said. "We have to work with housing developers to provide more housing stock. Then agencies would line up to provide services. The United Way will force that conversation to happen; then things can happen faster."