

Innovation in Government: Mayor Nutter's Homeless Initiative

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Summary

During the worst recession since the Great Depression, the City of Philadelphia has reduced the number of individuals living on the streets. This remarkable achievement can be attributed to the Mayor's Homeless Initiative, a key component of which is the strong partnership between the City and the Philadelphia Housing Authority. The combined strategies are an innovative way in which Philadelphia is working to reduce the number of people who are homeless on its streets.

The Problem: Lack of Permanent Affordable Housing for the Homeless

Most studies and analyses suggest that the best way to assist individuals and families moving towards self-sufficiency is by providing access to permanent affordable housing. But an extremely low income

household — which is the category a homeless individual and/or family falls into — earns \$23,340, only about 30 percent of the Philadelphia-area median income of \$77,800. At a household income of \$23,340, an individual or family can afford a monthly rent of no more than \$584; however, fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Philadelphia is \$842 (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2009). An individual earning minimum wage, \$7.15 per hour in 2009, can afford a monthly rent of no more than \$372. For a minimum wage earner with a family, a two-bedroom unit (fair market rent of \$1,005) is unobtainable (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2009).

The Solution: The Homeless Initiative

In May 2008, Mayor Nutter announced a comprehensive plan to reduce homelessness in Philadelphia. This strategy rests on providing a full range of options to move individuals and families out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

Despite soaring unemployment rates, home foreclosures, and nonprofits struggling to provide basic services, Philadelphia has achieved a decrease in the number of homeless on its streets as well as a decrease in its family shelter census. The City of Philadelphia's November 2009 Point in Time (PIT) homeless street counts showed a 26 percent decrease in the number of individuals living on the street. This equates to 395 individuals counted on the

streets of Center City and other targeted areas compared to 532 at the same time in November 2008. In addition, for the same PIT count, the City's shelters reported a slight increase of 1 percent for the number of singles in shelter and a 6 percent decrease in the number of family households in shelter.

Year 1 of the Mayor's plan called for the creation of 700 new housing opportunities: 200 housing units for homeless individuals, 300 housing units for homeless families, 125 housing first units for chronically homeless individuals with severe mental illness, and 75 entry-level/low-demand housing/treatment options for chronically homeless individuals with behavioral health challenges. This plan, a comprehensive first step in addressing homelessness, demonstrates the City's commitment to providing a range of housing and services to those who are homeless and struggling with behavioral health issues.

A key component of the plan is a renewed partnership between the City and the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA). In year 1 of the plan, PHA committed 500 housing opportunities targeted to both individuals (200) and families (300) in the City's homeless and behavioral health systems. These opportunities have been a critical resource in providing a back door out of homelessness, as well as creating movement and additional capacity within those systems. These opportunities, and the ongoing support from PHA, have created a dramatic and important

increase in permanent housing available in Philadelphia.

The voucher component of the plan provides an example of both the strong partnership with PHA and its immediate impact. Individuals graduating from the City's entry-level programs are provided with a Housing Choice Voucher and case management supports provided by the City and its community-based partners. The supports are key for individuals in making the transition and remaining stably housed. In turn, homeless individuals coming directly from the streets fill the vacated entry-level program slots. With one voucher, two individuals are provided with supportive housing options and a chance to move toward self-sufficiency.

Based on the success of year 1, PHA provided an additional 200 vouchers to the City. Together, PHA and the City have found homes for 263 men and women, most of whom have spent years cycling from the street and in and out of the homeless and behavioral health systems. By the end of the first year of the Mayor's plan (Spring 2009), the City had increased its stock of permanent housing opportunities by 51 percent for families and by 26 percent for individuals.

Using vouchers to move individuals into affordable housing is not new; neither are partnerships between municipalities and housing authorities to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to these opportunities. In fact, they have become standard

practice. If providing vouchers and forming a partnership with a local housing authority is not a new concept, then how can it be considered innovative?

How the Homeless Initiative Is Innovative

Through this renewed partnership with PHA, Philadelphia has begun creating systemic change in its homeless and behavioral health systems. The voucher allocation has allowed the City to create movement and flow-through in its systems. The City is reconsidering the structure of its systems, rethinking client outcomes, and vigorously considering other forms of permanent housing to meet the disparate needs of homeless individuals.

When an individual receives a voucher and moves to permanent housing, someone from the street is able to access the vacated residential program/treatment slot. Likewise, when a family moves from transitional housing into a PHA unit, another family is able to access the transitional housing unit. The PHA resources have allowed the City to have a positive and dramatic impact on the number of individuals living on the street and have loosened the bottleneck in transitional housing for families.

The process to operationalize this partnership is managed by dedicated staff from both the City and PHA. This coordinated effort has enabled the City to monitor the

process from referral to move-in and thereafter as well. Coordinated management allows for efficient and effective processes and ultimately ensures that individuals move to housing as quickly as possible with the supports that they need.

Beyond the PHA Partnership

In addition to the PHA partnership, a number of other components of the overall strategy have helped in engaging homeless individuals with the goal of providing them with housing and treatment options. First established in 2006, overnight cafes showed early promise as an alternative to streets for homeless individuals, especially in the winter and especially for those who are severely mentally ill. For many of these individuals, emergency shelter is intimidating, and the café can provide another vehicle through which a person can be engaged to accept treatment or housing.

The Mayor's plan continued the commitment to the cafes. Working with the Philadelphia International Airport, Philadelphia Police Department, the Mental Health Association, and SELF, Inc., the City mounted an outreach strategy to engage individuals sleeping in the airport and transport them to shelter and other housing programs. After this successful work, the City expanded efforts to 30th Street Station for a similar outreach engagement.

Reference

National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2009). Out of Reach 2009, available at <http://www.nlihc.org/oor/oor2009/>.