

DECADE TO DOORWAYS ADVISORY TEAM Community Report

In 2017, Chester County Departments of Community Development and Human Services contracted with Voice & Vision, Inc. to begin building relationships, gathering input, and soliciting interest from persons to be part of an advisory team to inform the Decade to Doorways (D2D) initiative to prevent and end homelessness in Chester County.

Such an advisory team would be comprised of people who were homeless individually or as a family, who had used services in Chester County, and who would represent the diversity of needs that arise for people experiencing homelessness. This team would offer insight into the causes of homelessness; barriers to mental health, addictions treatment, and housing; what helps people find and maintain a home; and the strengths and weaknesses in the Chester County network of agencies, programs, and supports.

This Community Report is a summary of the results gathered and the process Voice & Vision conducted to assess the network of agencies and supports, build relationships, gather data to represent the voice of people who have experienced homelessness and those who serve them, and to inform and test the concept of building an advisory team of people with lived experience.

Kelly Frizen, Project Lead

Valerie Melroy, Chief Executive Officer

Decade to Doorways (D2D)

Vision: To ensure a community-wide network of services to prevent and end homelessness in Chester County by shifting from a system that manages homelessness, to a system that diverts, prevents and rapidly re-houses.

Client Centered: A guiding principle of the D2D initiative is to focus on a client-centered approach that encourages individual empowerment, service leveraging, community coordination and long-term recovery management.

Homelessness is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon with many causes. Solutions to the problem will be as varied and comprehensive as the problem itself; therefore, the voice of the people experiencing homelessness is critical to success. Related goals are to:

- *provide meaningful input on systemic issues, resource gaps and barriers concerning the Chester County homeless services system*
- *assist Decade to Doorways in recognizing its' strengths, weaknesses, and challenges facing the initiative, as well as opportunities and threats to accomplishing its defined and evolving mission**

***Source: Chester County Department of Community Development Decade to Doorways Consumer Advocacy and Advisory Team (CAAT) Proposal**

Population and Methodology

Two questionnaires were developed, one for people with lived experience (LE) and one for outreach professionals. The LE questionnaire was translated into Spanish also. The questionnaire for professionals gathered information about outreach services and conducted an assessment of the current homeless support system. The contact with professionals also enabled Voice & Vision to find out where to go to interview people experiencing homelessness and to inquire about their interest in participating in an advisory team.



- The **LE questionnaire** was used to gather the voice of individuals and families who have /are experiencing homelessness and used services in Chester County during that time regarding their experience with the outreach network as well as their interest in being part of an advisory team moving forward. **A total of 56 interviews were conducted with people who have experienced homelessness.** Forty people were interviewed between September 16 and October 12, 2017 at seven sites, and 19 were interviewed by phone. Of the total interviewed, 17 were “stars” or “leaders” (people whose names were submitted by agencies as having graduated to maintaining housing or who were well-informed of the current system and willing to share their experience and be a voice for others). Three interviews were conducted in Spanish.
- The **outreach provider questionnaire** was used to gather the voice of homeless outreach agency provider professionals to learn about their best practices, challenges serving people, and recommendations for improving services and supports in the County. **A total of 19 interviews were conducted with outreach providers** (mostly program directors/managers) by phone between August 5 and October 12, 2017.

Voice & Vision would like to thank the staff and directors who coordinated with us and graciously welcomed the team for site visits to interview people with homeless experience:

Jim Davis – City Gate
Lenda Carillo – Kennett Area Community Services
Amy Scheuren – Kennett Area Community Services
Melanie Weiler – Kennett Area Community Services
Reandra Hall – Oxford Neighborhood Community Center
Andrea Pachella – Oxford Silo
Barbara Kirby – St. Agnes Outreach
Gary Russell – St. Peter’s Episcopal Church
Elmira Butler – Salvation Army

What Respondents Told Us ...

Strengths of the system of care

❖ Many outreach services and supports (number in parentheses represents how many indicated)

- People appreciate and named many services and supports which helped them. Examples: Shelters (Safe Harbor (14), City Gate (6), Friends (5), etc.); Resource/Outreach (Crossroads (5), KACS (4), Open Hearth (3), etc.); Mental Health (Human Services (10), Fellowship (3), Handicrafters, etc.); Substance abuse help (Gaudenzia, (4), AA/12 step (2), Sponsors, etc.); Pantries (City Gate (4), Salvation Army, (4), Jubilee (3), etc.); HUD/Housing Authority; Faith-Based (Saint Agnes (8), St. Peter Episcopal (5), Act in Faith (6), etc.).
- Outreach providers say the robust network of outreach services and how well they communicate is a blessing and is not always the case in other counties.
- Outreach providers shared 'priceless supports': Churches and faith-based groups who provide counsel and resources; Outreach providers which act as a network for non-profits; libraries; affordable hotels; drop-in centers; community volunteers in medicine; Wings for Success, and several others.

❖ Desire to participate in Advisory Team

49 LE respondents said "yes" for interest in being part of an advisory team, and provided contact information.

Considerations for the system of care

❖ Wider network of resources

There is a clustering of services in major towns and a lack in other towns, AND a lack of affordable public transportation. For example, Kennett Square has services people in Oxford are referred to but can't get to.

❖ More affordable, safe housing

Both outreach providers and LE respondents indicate that there is not enough affordable, safe housing. Responses indicated that the conditions of available housing are poor, that some areas like Phoenixville have rent increasing, and that some are scared to live in Coatesville which is where most housing is offered.

❖ Meet basic needs

- LE respondents say basic needs are hard to accomplish when homeless (30% or 17 people indicate access to basics as biggest challenge when homeless). Examples include a place to shower and do laundry and when seeking a job: clothing, a haircut, and having a cell phone which has email and texting.
- LE respondents also indicated that they appreciate hot meals which are healthy, as it is difficult to store and cook food when homeless, and that food pantries often are full of unhealthy food options (carbs).

❖ Supports for mental health/substance use treatment

- 35% of LE respondents indicated that getting help with addiction or mental illness would have helped prevent multiple homelessness experiences.
- Responses indicated that outreach providers and shelters are not equipped to handle chronic/severe mental illness and substance abuse, and that they need referral options to get individuals needed care.

❖ Further study of the *Vulnerability Index and Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VISPDAT)*

Of 12 outreach providers who commented on the VISPDAT, 7 shared that it makes the process of helping people slower or is not working well, while five commented that it streamlines the process. Comments From 21 people with lived experience indicate assessment concerns such as: long wait, confusing, unfair scale, long intake/forms, and that Connect Points is not available 24x7.

❖ Learning about resources when needed

When asked what they wish they knew sooner, 18 previously homeless individuals named various resources and resource options being made available when and where needed. One notable quote:

"When I was hungry, you had my undivided attention."

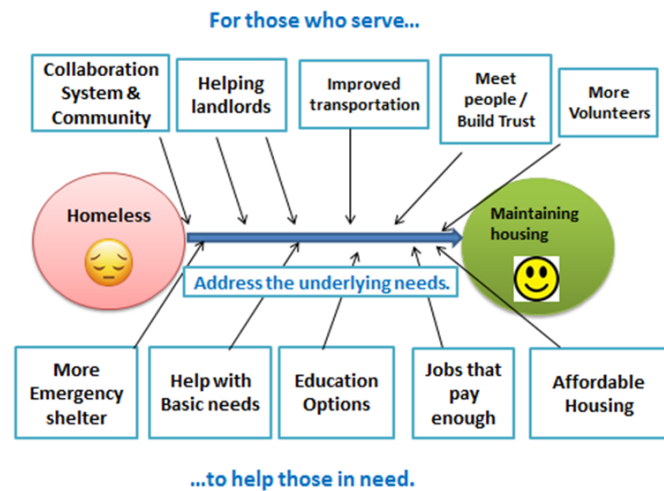
Recommendations and Next Steps

❖ Recommendations

Outreach Professionals identified the supports that work best to help people move from homelessness to maintaining housing:

- System & Community Collaboration
- Re-Engaging Family
- Being a Friend and have empathy
- Case Management
- Teach and Coach Budgeting & Life Skills
- Referrals based on Targeted Needs
- Support Groups
- Help with Basic Needs

Recommendations from Outreach Professionals



Shower, Clothing to interview, place to do Laundry, Haircut, Cell phone with email & text

❖ Next Steps

The Department of Community Development (DCD) is committed to incorporating the voice of people who have used services in the county toward preventing and ending homelessness as well as helping people in mental health and substance abuse recovery. Voice & Vision and five people with lived experience will present and dialogue about these Advisory Team Report results on January 29, 2018 with representatives from the Departments of Human Services, DCD, Drug & Alcohol, and Mental Health/Intellectual Disabilities as well as directors from area outreach provider agencies. In addition, DCD is committed to funding an Advisory Network of people with lived experience to continue to inform quality initiatives and programming in 2018.

Stakeholder Representatives

- **Dolores Colligan**, Deputy Director, Chester County Department of Community Development
- **Donna Carlson**, Deputy Director for Managed Care, Chester County Department of Human Services
- **Lauren Campbell**, Chester County Dept. of Community Development & Decade to Doorways Administrator
- **Rob Henry**, previously the Family Emergency Shelter Manager at Friends Association and now the Centralized Intake Program Manager at Housing Alliance of Delaware