

COUNTY HOMELESSNESS TRUST FUNDS: COUNTY PLANS

Providing counties with flexible and cost-effective resources to help low-income residents achieve self-sufficiency and create stable homes

Under New Jersey's Homeless Trust Fund law, counties are required to adopt a plan that includes provisions for how the funds will be spent. Plans must show evidence of a strategy "to address housing for homeless persons that include measurable and achievable objectives to end homelessness in the county." The law further states that plans shall "identify and address the needs of the homeless within the jurisdiction, including strategies to reduce the need for emergency room care, hospital care, law enforcement, foster care, and other social services associated with the homeless and homelessness."

For examples of plans developed by counties with Homeless Trust Funds, see the links below:

Bergen: <http://www.co.bergen.nj.us/DocumentCenter/View/127>

Mercer: <https://app.box.com/s/uedy679bdbj6jw0tmvfqn7nfix9ujod>

Middlesex: <http://www.cominghomemiddlesex.org/resource-file/middlesex-ten-year-plan.pdf>

The full text of Somerset County's plan is below.

Somerset County 2014 Homelessness Trust Fund Plan

Somerset County has a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of chronic and other homeless individuals and families, including the mental health, veteran, youth, substance abuse, and domestic violence subpopulations. The strategy, which ultimately seeks to ensure that clients have decent, affordable housing and supportive services, focuses on the provision of services to prevent homelessness, services and rapid re-housing for individuals that are currently homeless, and continued development of affordable, permanent housing for low-income and special needs populations. The Department of Human Services also recognizes, and is committed to, the importance of advocacy as a tool to address chronic and other homelessness.

This Homeless Trust Fund Plan is presented to comply with the administrative requirements of the Homelessness Trust Fund, which state that "A local government may adopt a homeless housing plan to address the housing needs of homeless persons within its jurisdiction. The plan – which will be reviewed and updated annually – shall evidence a strategic local scheme to identify and address the needs of the homeless within the jurisdiction, including strategies to reduce the need for emergency room care, hospital care, law enforcement, foster care and other social services associated with the homeless and homelessness." This plan begins with a summary of documented need, is followed by an inventory of the housing and services that are currently available, and ends with findings and policy recommendations for the use of monies that accumulate in the Homelessness Trust Fund.

Need

County officials and community providers are in agreement that data from the Annual Point in Time Survey is the most reliable source of information about the County's homeless population and that it will guide efforts to plan for and provide services to County residents who are homeless. In like fashion, there is also agreement that there is not one definitive source of data for the number of County residents that are at risk of

being homeless and that this estimate will be an amalgam of data from a number of sources including the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the NJ Department of Human Services, the County Board of Social Services, and community providers. This plan will use data from all of these sources to make its recommendations.

According to data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, there are approximately 4,480 households in Somerset County that are at risk for homelessness. This estimate is based on the number of renters and owners who earn less than 30 percent of the area median income and have a housing cost burden that is greater than 50 percent of their income. This group includes 1,295 elderly households, 1,905 small and large related households, and 1,280 other households. It is estimated that the 1,905 related households include approximately 3,200 children, who are also at risk for homelessness. It is also noteworthy that many of the people who need services have never needed or applied for government assistance, making it very difficult to quantify or understand their needs.

According to data from the 2014 Point in Time Survey, there are approximately 256 homeless adults in Somerset County and 57 homeless children. Of the homeless adults, the greatest number of them, 182 (71.1%), live in transitional housing; 60 (23.4%) of the homeless adults live in emergency shelters; 12 (4.7%) are unsheltered. There are 13 chronically homeless individuals and no chronically homeless families in Somerset County. Of the 313 total homeless people that were counted in the survey, 11.2% percent reported themselves to be Hispanic. The survey also revealed that a disproportionate percentage of African Americans/Blacks were homeless (36.4%) in comparison with the overall County population of 8 percent. In addition, 65.5% were male and 34.5% were female.

Following is a chart that reflects the race and ethnicity of the 313 homeless people who were counted in the 2014 Point in Time Survey:

Race	%	
American Indian	0.0	(1 respondent)
Asian (India, Orient, Middle East)	0.0	(2 respondents)
Black	36.4	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0	
White	30.0	
No response	31.4	
Other	1.6	

Existing Housing and Services

The lead entity for Somerset County’s homelessness planning efforts, and the institutional structure for the County to carry out its homelessness strategy, is the County’s Continuum of Care (COC) Committee. The COC Committee is a federally-mandated effort that is comprised of state and local government representatives, non-profit agency representatives, and other community members who are interested in working to develop a comprehensive system of care for people who are coping with poverty and homelessness. This committee includes representation from, and is regularly attended by Catholic Charities, Food Bank Network of Somerset County, the Central Jersey Housing Resource Center (formerly known as SCCOAH), SHIP, Somerset County United Way, Volunteers of America, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Somerset County Board of Social Services, Salvation Army, HomeSharing, Monarch Housing, and Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children. The COC Committee reports to the County’s Human Services Advisory Council (HSAC), which reports to the Board of Chosen Freeholders. In addition, the HSAC and

COC Committees serve as points of contact for the NJ Department of Human Services and in that capacity prepare planning documents as well as status and evaluative reports. Both the HSAC and the COC Committee also function as advocates for the County's vulnerable residents, partnering with other organizations to provide support for affordable housing programs, policies, and decisions.

Services to Prevent Homelessness

County administrators/decision-makers and the non-profit community are in agreement that the best strategy to help prevent homelessness for individuals and families with children who are at imminent risk of being homeless is to provide financial or other assistance to avert the impending homelessness. The jurisdiction believes that while emergency assistance is at times necessary, so is the need for one to take action to improve one's circumstances and to move toward self-sufficiency. At the same time, it understands that there are some whose ability to achieve self-sufficiency is limited by factors beyond one's control. Within that context, government and private, non-profit entities work together to provide a number of services to prevent homelessness. Somerset County has an array of services, such as mortgage payments, rental payments, security payments and/or utility payments, which are available through the Somerset County Board of Social Services, Catholic Charities, Municipal Welfare System, Alternatives, Food Bank Network of Somerset County, Franklin Food Bank, Hillsborough Food Pantry, Resource Center for Women and Their Families, Department of Community Affairs, Homeless Prevention Rapid Re-Housing Program, and the NJ Homeless Prevention Program. In addition, the faith community provides a number of resources to prevent homelessness. Emergency Support Services include the provision of food, clothing, transportation, child care as needed to assist families in securing other essential services, medically necessary prescription drugs, and medical care to alleviate life-threatening and public health conditions.

Services for the Homeless

There are four emergency shelters in Somerset County, including one dedicated to victims of domestic violence and another for children. When shelters are full, area motels and out-of-county shelters provide additional emergency accommodations. Unaccompanied veterans are often sheltered at the Veterans Administration Domiciliary program, where they also receive supportive services. Transitional housing is available for individuals with various special needs, including veterans and those suffering or recovering from mental illness and/or alcohol/drug addiction. A limited amount of transitional housing exists for families; it is operated by Interfaith Hospitality Network and Alternatives. The Board of Social Services also houses individuals and families at local hotels. Housing counseling, food and energy assistance, legal services, mental health services and counseling, affordable childcare, and health services are also available to the homeless.

Findings

- The most efficient and cost effective way to deal with homelessness is to prevent it by providing services and/or rental assistance to individuals and families while they are still housed.
- One's ability to earn a "housing wage" must be a component of any meaningful effort to reduce the incidence of homelessness. Employment barriers should be examined and relevant services (education, training, soft skills, transportation) recommended.

- The production of permanent affordable housing is preferable to the production of emergency shelter or transitional housing.
- Applications for HTF monies must demonstrate the ability to leverage dollars from other private funding sources
- Additional support is needed for individuals and families as they leave welfare
- Policymakers should be realistic about what can be expected of individuals with debilitating, long-term mental health issues

Following are policy recommendations to address individuals and families with children at risk of becoming homeless:

- Increase efforts to make clients aware of homeless prevention services and the importance of early intervention.
- Continue the provision of emergency assistance in the form of rental assistance, utility payments, food, and other basic needs.
- Provide short-term rental assistance to families that are at risk of becoming homeless.
- To the extent possible, life skills, financial management training and appropriate case management services should be a mandatory component of any rental assistance program.

Following are policy recommendations to address the needs of persons who are homeless:

- Continue to provide emergency shelter and transitional housing at existing facilities.
- Continue the provision of supportive services in the form of housing counseling, food and energy assistance, legal services, mental health services and counseling, affordable childcare, and health services.
- Support the development of permanent housing
- Individuals and families should be moved into permanent housing as quickly as possible.
- Individuals and families leaving emergency shelter should be provided with case management and follow up services.
- To the extent possible, life skills, financial management training and appropriate case management services should be a mandatory component of any rental assistance that is provided to individuals and families leaving emergency shelter.