

Executive Summary

Homelessness is a human tragedy with steep, long-term costs. The ripple effects of this problem reach all corners of our communities. Now is the time for Northwestern Minnesota¹ to implement a plan that will end this costly human tragedy in our region.

Data shows that when people are homeless over a long term, their needs go unmet—chronic conditions worsen, mental health issues cause barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, addictions become more severe, children face developmental delays, and parenting issues escalate as stressors mount. As these conditions worsen, the options to address and treat them become more expensive. The long-term homeless population is far more likely to use costly crisis services such as emergency rooms, shelters, and foster care; and to require special education services for their children. In addition, they are more likely to be incarcerated and spend more time in jail or prison.

Rather than *managing* homelessness with these expensive crisis services, Minnesota is shifting to a research-based effort to *end* long-term homelessness and prevent new cases of homelessness. Regional entities across the state are implementing comprehensive plans with involvement from citizens, all levels of government, schools, faith communities, funders, and homeless service agencies.

Homelessness in Northwestern Minnesota

Evidence of homelessness

In Northwestern Minnesota, we don't see the obvious signs of homelessness—cardboard shelters in alleys, ever-present panhandlers on main streets, crowds of the needy outside emergency shelters. The homeless of rural areas such as ours are called the “hidden homeless.” They move from one unstable, sub-standard or cost-burdened situation to another, hidden from the eyes of the wider community.

As the following data shows, homelessness *does* exist in Northwestern Minnesota.

- In October 2006, local surveyors identified 198 homeless persons in Northwestern Minnesota during a 24-hour period.
- In January 2007, a 24-hour survey identified 266 homeless persons in the region.
- In 2006, more than 866 homeless persons were turned away from Northwestern Minnesota emergency shelters due to a lack of available beds.
- From July 2006 to June 2007, over 1,000 people in Northwestern Minnesota were identified as “long-term homeless.”

¹ Northwestern Minnesota includes Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Mahnomon, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Roseau, and Red Lake counties as well as Red Lake Nation, White Earth Reservation, and a small portion of Leech Lake Reservation.

Main causes of homelessness

Homelessness is caused by two main factors:

1. Poverty
2. Shortage of affordable housing

Both of these factors are present in Northwestern Minnesota. Eleven of twelve counties in the region have a higher poverty rate than the state average. About 30% of the jobs in Kittson, Roseau, Marshall, Pennington, Red Lake, Polk, and Norman counties pay less than a living wage and 42% of the jobs in Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Lake of the Woods and Mahnommen counties pay less than a family supporting wage.²

Data shows that the current supply of affordable housing does not meet the demand. Thousands of low-income and extremely low-income Northwestern Minnesota households are paying over 30% or even over 50% of their income on housing. For these households, any sudden setback—an illness or an accident, an unexpected car repair, a job loss, or the loss of a spouse—could cause the loss of their housing.

Other factors impacting homelessness

While poverty and a lack of affordable housing are the main causes of homelessness, other interconnected factors come into play. In cases where these factors exist, finding and sustaining permanent housing becomes increasingly challenging.

Some factors at the *individual level* that can cause, complicate or prolong homelessness include:

- mental health conditions
- physical health conditions
- chemical addiction
- dual diagnoses (some combination of more than one diagnosed mental, physical, or addictive condition)
- lack of education and job skills
- prior institutional placement
- poor credit and housing history

Some *systemic issues* in our area that can cause, complicate or prolong homelessness include:

- lack of transportation needed in this sparsely populated, large, rural geography
- shortage of affordable, accessible child care
- the high cost of utilities in an extreme climate
- sub-standard conditions of regional housing
- shortage of emergency shelter and supportive housing
- foreclosure trends

² “Family supporting wage” figures do not include budget lines for entertainment, skills training, emergencies, vacations, home mortgage down payment, life insurance, gifts, pets, home appliance purchases, or savings for college and retirement. Figures shown above are for a two-parent family with two children and two full-time workers.

Best Practices

Permanent Supportive Housing

Recent studies have shown that creating units of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and moving long-term homeless clients rapidly into those units reduces their use of expensive crisis services. In addition to housing, PSH programs offer supportive services to address systemic and individual barriers. Services may include—for instance—job training, mental health counseling, child care assistance, or transportation assistance. The goal is to move clients toward greater self-sufficiency and stability. Case managers work with the clients to identify needs and then monitor individual or family progress.

Housing First

Housing First is based on research showing that clients are more successful if they have permanent housing *while* addressing other barriers such as mental, physical or chemical health issues. Placement in housing is a first priority.

Rapid Re-Housing

Shortening the length of the homeless episode decreases the harmful impact of housing instability. Rapid Re-housing involves quickly placing homeless individuals in permanent housing—either in PSH, subsidized housing, or some other affordable, appropriate option. The current severe lack of PSH and affordable housing in Northwestern Minnesota limits the ability to fully and aggressively implement this concept.

Case Management

Case managers are assigned to clients who are homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless. They help clients recognize barriers, devise goals, and monitor progress. Case managers provide the linkage between clients and the resources available to help them overcome barriers to housing and attain greater self-sufficiency. Given the many personal and systemic barriers that the homeless face in our region, case management is an essential investment.

Prevention

It is well-documented that *preventing* an episode of homelessness costs less than serving the needs of clients who are already homeless. Imagine the low-income worker who suddenly loses her job and needs temporary financial assistance while she seeks other employment. Without that assistance, her family will lose their home. Imagine young adults leaving foster care without a supportive parent to help them acquire housing or job training. Providing homeless prevention assistance to these young adults puts them on a path toward being productive, well-adjusted community members.

Prevention efforts include—for instance—providing vouchers for transportation, first and last month's rent, landlord mediation, or assistance with child care subsidy application forms. A case manager may be assigned to monitor client progress and provide links to services such as mental health counseling, mortgage foreclosure counseling, job skills training or substance abuse treatment.

Focus on Youth

Homelessness as a child is the number one predictor of whether someone will become homeless as an adult. Investing in young people will pay off—likely more so than for any other sub-group.

Recommendations

Using input from partners throughout the region, Northwest Minnesota Continuum of Care (CoC) devised a comprehensive plan called *Heading Home Northwest Minnesota*. Over the next 10 years, stakeholders will collaborate to reach two broad goals laid out in the Action Plan section of the document. A Heading Home Coordination Group will be recruited to oversee the plan and report on progress.

Broad Goals for *Heading Home Northwestern Minnesota*

1. End long-term homelessness in Northwestern Minnesota in 10 years
2. Prevent of new cases of homelessness

Six strategies will be employed to move toward the broad goals. The strategies incorporate Best Practices with modifications to meet the unique needs of the region. Each strategy includes action items that require participation by homeless service agencies, elected officials at all levels, faith communities, schools, governmental agencies, funders, and advocates. As new data is examined and new strategies come to light, the plan will be revised.

Six Strategies

1. Build community awareness about homelessness in Northwestern Minnesota
2. Create additional emergency, supportive housing and affordable housing opportunities while preserving existing housing options
3. Improve supportive service availability, coordination, and results
4. Provide effective, coordinated outreach to the homeless
5. Improve discharge planning from public institutions (*to avoid discharge into homelessness*)
6. Improve data on regional homelessness

Networking and collaboration are essential elements of the plan. Strong partnerships will be needed to overcome systemic challenges such as transportation barriers, lack of federal funding for supportive services, and other issues. Working together across agencies, across county boundaries, and across communities will help remove the obstacles posed by rural diseconomies of scale, diversity of needs, and limited program resources.

It will be vital for the partners in this comprehensive plan to fully understand Northwestern Minnesota's homeless population and the systems that serve them. The narrative section of *Heading Home Northwestern Minnesota* contains valuable data and insight. This information will serve as a foundation of shared knowledge among partners and, as such, deserves a closer look.

The task before us is not easy, but failure to act will mean a continuation of the needless and expensive cycle of homelessness.