

AN OVERVIEW

Homelessness in Wisconsin

Carrie Poser, Continuum of Care Director Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care

n any given night, there are over 5,000 people in Wisconsin without a place to call home. They are sleeping in shelters, in cars, under bridges, in caves, and in storage units. Some may be sleeping in transitional living projects. But all lack a safe, stable, and permanent home.

Homelessness is a statewide issue, impacting every county in Wisconsin. Of those 5,000 people experiencing homelessness on a given night, 67% are located in a county other than Dane, Milwaukee, and Racine. One in every 217 Wisconsinites experienced homeless in 2016, although that ratio varies across the state.²

Rural Homelessness

When we think about homelessness, a person sleeping on a park bench or in a doorway is often the image that comes to mind. While this is common in urban settings, in rural communities homelessness is often hidden. An individual or family may be staying in a camper on someone's property (with or without the property owner's permission). They may be sleeping in their car in a store parking lot. To avoid detection, people stay in caves near a river or create makeshift campsites deep in the woods.

Rural areas have unique challenges to addressing homelessness. Services are difficult to access due to a lack of transportation and distance. Homeless assistance may be limited or non-existent due to agency capacity and funding. Where there are emergency shelters, they are often small and at capacity. More common are voucher programs that rely on limited community-based funding and the availability of motels or hotels.

Single Adults v. Family Homelessness

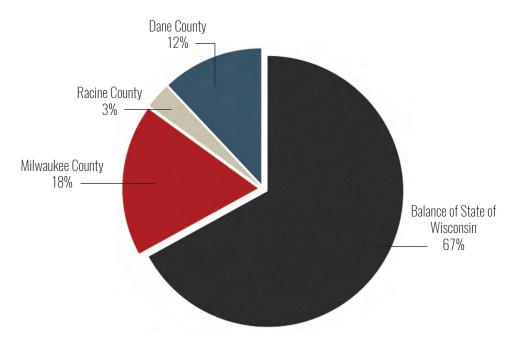
Homelessness does not only impact single adults; it affects families and youth as well. In fact, almost half (47.4%) of the people experiencing homelessness each night in Wisconsin are in families with minor children.³ This is higher than the national average, which is 35%.⁴

Single adults experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to have a disability. Nationally, 45% of single adults experiencing homelessness have a disability, compared with 21% of adults in families experiencing homelessness.⁵ In Wisconsin, 40% of people experiencing homelessness in 2016 had a disability, and of those 29% had a mental illness.⁶

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Homelessness in Wisconsin

January 2017 Point-in-Time Data



Source: State of Wisconsin

Homeless assistance providers across Wisconsin are identifying ways to best serve transition-age youth who are experiencing homelessness. Nationally, about 9% of those experiencing homelessness on any given night are between the ages of 18 and 24.7 In Wisconsin, the rate is 8.6%.8 This age group has specific needs that are different than those of older adults experiencing homelessness.

Causes of Homelessness

In Wisconsin the precursors to homelessness are inadequate access to housing, domestic violence, mental illness, and poverty. Data from the most recent Point-In-Time count in January 2017 indicates that 34% of adults experiencing homelessness were domestic violence survivors, 24%

had a persistent mental illness, and 14% had a substance use disorder.⁹

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty reports that in the most recent annual survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, major cities across the country report that top causes of homelessness among families and single adults were: (1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, and (3) poverty. For families, low wages were among the primary causes. For single adults, mental illness and substance abuse along with the lack of services needed to address these disabilities were among the primary causes. ¹⁰ All of these issues require multifaceted and collaborative approaches to solve. But the answer to homelessness is singular – housing.

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Wisconsin's Efforts to End Homelessness

Sara L. Buschman, Administrator, Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources, Wisconsin Department of Administration

n 2013, the Wisconsin Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness was created in response to the Governor's desire to better coordinate statewide resources, drive policies to eliminate homelessness, and to assist homeless individuals in finding stable housing so they are then able to access the resources needed to become self-sufficient through employment. The Council meets on a quarterly basis and has made significant steps to reduce inter-agency programmatic barriers, share data on trends, and identify emerging areas of need. Representatives from the following state agencies and stakeholder groups were appointed by the Secretary of the Department of Administration (DOA) to serve:

Wisconsin Departments of Administration, Health Services, Children and

Families, Veteran's Affairs, Workforce Development, Corrections, and Public Instruction

- Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- Continuum of Care organizations: Balance of State, Madison/Dane, Milwaukee and Racine
- Institute for Community Alliances

As the main sponsor of the Wisconsin Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, DOA has the lead role in chairing the Council and administers the main state and federally funded programs aimed at eliminating homelessness in Wisconsin. Homeless programs adminis-

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HOMELESSNESS DENSITY			
Brown County	1 in 122 residents	Kenosha	1 in 186 residents
Coulee	1 in 142 residents	Northwest	1 in 147 residents
Dairyland	1 in 204 residents	West Central	1 in 268 residents
Fox Cities	1 in 185 residents	Dane County	1 in 148 residents

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 data

Institute for Community Alliances, State of Wisconsin, 2016 Annual Report, www.icalliances.org

tered by DOA in the Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources include:

- Emergency Solutions Grants (federal funding, provided by HUD)
- Homeless Prevention Program
- Transitional Housing Program
- Critical Assistance Program
- State Shelter Subsidy Grants

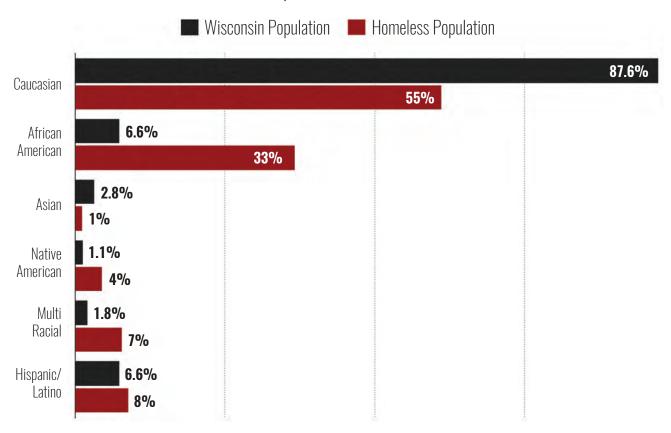
The state funds local providers to advertise homeless services and perform direct outreach to clients who are homeless. Services include: emergency assistance (emergency shelters, one-time rent and utility payments, and transitional housing); short-term supportive housing (rapid re-housing and transitional housing for up to 24 months); permanent supportive housing; and

assistance accessing other mainstream resources (e.g., SSI/SSDI, Medicare/Medicaid, SNAP). Coordinated intake is performed by approximately 200 agencies and local providers (except emergency shelters) that are funded by the state.

Wisconsin also funds efforts to identify Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOP-WA). These federal funds provide resources for meeting the housing needs of persons with AIDS or related diseases and their families. More information is available on the Aids Resource Center of Wisconsin website at http://www.arcw.org.

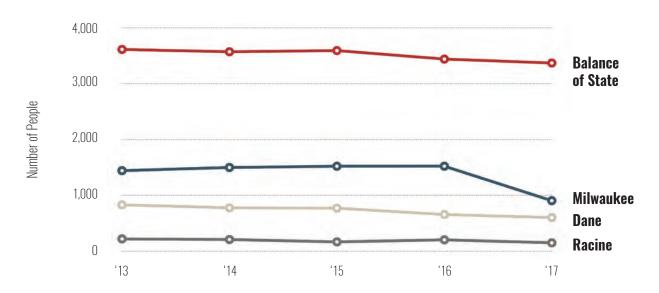
Additionally, Wisconsin partners with the Institute for Community Alliances to track data on Wisconsin's homeless population by utilizing Wisconsin's Housing Management Information System (HMIS).

Racial Disparities in Homelessness



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 data; January 2017 Point-in-Time data, State of Wisconsin

Homelessness Point-in-Time Trends



Finally, partially sponsored by DOA, WIHousingSearch.org advertises affordable places to rent and provides resources for persons experiencing homelessness and other social services. Other services provided by DOA, or partner agencies, may be found on the DOA website at http://doa. wi.gov/divisions/housing

At its creation, the Wisconsin Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness prioritized developing strategies to reduce the occurrence of homelessness, especially chronic homelessness. Chronically homeless persons or families have both a disability and have been homeless for at least 12 months. The Council prioritized this population as people experiencing chronic homelessness have high and complex service needs, including high rates of mental illness and/or substance use disorders and higher rates of institutionalization and incarceration. Most of these treatment costs are borne by the health care system. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness,1 providing housing with supportive services creates an environment in which program participants are less likely to draw on expensive public services, use homeless shelters, or be incarcerated. Frequent and avoidable visits to the emergency room, inpatient hospitalization for medical or psychiatric care, and nursing home stays can often be avoided as well.

The Council recognized that reducing homelessness not only enhances the quality of life of the individual, but also strengthens the community in which the person or family resides. The Council champions strategies focusing on collaboration to utilize existing funding more effectively and to address issues comprehensively at the time of the first homeless episode. Participating state agencies work together to implement Council recommendations and serve as an example of collaboration for governments and communities. Council members educate state and local leadership, service providers, and the public on homelessness issues, and focus on working together to assist households in accessing needed services and to intervene in the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

START A CONVERSATION

Coalitions the recipe for sustained change.

Lieutenant Governor Rebecca Kleefisch. State of Wisconsin

ast month I met Lia, a middle school student from Manitowoc. Lia has stable housing, a good family, and a good school. She also has a big heart, which led her to found an outreach to children at the local homeless shelter. It was my joy to welcome her to the Capitol and learn about her life-changing work with the Hopeful Hearts Club. She and her friends and fellow volunteers make gift bags to ensure kids at their local shelter still celebrate birthdays and holidays, and now they are hosting their first food drive to provide food when school is out for the summer. It is incredible and inspiring, and it is emblematic of the servant-hearted volunteers and professionals I have met across Wisconsin who are helping the homeless.

Non-profit organizations like the Hopeful Hearts Club are critical to serving the homeless; churches, charities, and domestic violence shelters are among the many on the front lines providing not only food and a roof, but also counseling and hope. Government too has a part to





play in confronting homelessness, both at the state and local level. That is where you, the readers of this magazine, come in.

At the state level, we are trying to step up for the first time in decades to confront this problem. We are pulling on a variety of levers to reduce and prevent homelessness for single adults and families. All of our agencies are in on the action, especially the Division of Energy, Housing, and Community Resources (DEHCR) and the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA). Many others play a part, though. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) provides assistance to low-income families hit hard by an unexpected emergency





Homeless people are people; they need and deserve inclusion in our communities and our economy. And by finding that inclusion...they achieve the stable life and income they need to make a regular rent or mortgage payment.

that forces a choice between paying a crucial bill, or making the rent payment. The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) operates shelters for veterans from all eras, not just Vietnam, but our recent conflicts as well. The Department of Health Services (DHS)covers many homeless people through Medicaid or helps feed them through FoodShare.

The latter examples are an important reminder of the role that counties can play in combating homelessness. County veteran services officers, for instance, are the boots on the ground that can connect homeless vets to vet-specific shelters or halfway houses. County human services staff may sign homeless individuals up for one of our DCF or DHS programs. And let us be honest – many sheriffs and circuit courts see homeless people in jails, Treatment Alternatives and Diversions programs, and courtrooms.

I hope this series of articles will inspire you, as county officials and employees, to start a conversation internally around homelessness. We have done that at the state level over the course of the past year and found new ways for our agencies to work together more efficiently after we focused on the topic. Many people are enrolled across different systems and silos, but they need coordinated care to get back up on their feet.

Some communities are already zoned in on this issue, not only in our major urban centers of Milwaukee and Dane Counties, but also in La Crosse and the Fox Valley. Creating a coalition that draws in the county, city, schools, and community groups is the best recipe for sustained change.

As a county or community launches a working group or coalition around this issue, it is vital that the first step is to define your foundational principles, even before you start setting goals. For my part, I think we need to focus on three key principles:

 Every person is unique. Some people just need a short-term loan or help with an apart-

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Opposite left to right: Lt. Governor Kleefisch in her office with Lia. Lt. Governor visits the Silver Spring affordable housing development of the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee. Right: Joining WHEDA Deputy Director Brian Schimming and Madison Mayor Paul Soglin to announce tax credits for an affordable housing community with set-aside units for families coming out of homelessness.



- ment search after an emergency led to an eviction. Other people have multiple hurdles to overcome. Some are families, others are singles. If we build systems that only address our mental image of a homeless single adult with an alcohol or drug addiction, we will miss or ill-serve far too many.
- Side-by-side help works best. Whatever the level of service that is needed, it makes the most impact when it comes through intensive case management, which we prefer to call side-by-side casework. Whether the delivery method comes from a "housing first" or transitional program, or day-to-day check-ins by volunteers, regular, sustained interaction with caseworkers best helps those struggling with inner demons like drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, abuse survival or

- some other trauma.
- Inclusion and independence are the ultimate end game. We should not walk by the homeless in public; we also should not exile them to shelters out of sight and out of mind. Homeless people are people; they need and deserve inclusion in our communities and our economy. And by finding that inclusion, which comes as they strengthen their coping abilities, work readiness, and resolve, they achieve the stable life and income they need to make a regular rent or mortgage payment.

With those principles in mind, counties and communities have the building blocks to join hands with state government and hundreds of dedicated volunteers like Lia to reduce and prevent homelessness in Wisconsin.

How to Get Involved

Get involved with your local homeless coalition and HUD Continuum of Care.

Balance of State CoC: www.wiboscoc.org
Dane County CoC: www.unitedwaydanecounty.org
Milwaukee County CoC: www.milwaukeecoc.org
Racine County CoC: www.racinecoc.org

Come to the table and share your expertise.

Attend local homeless coalition meetings and HUD COC meetings Discuss what you do and what you have to offer Hear which barriers to ending homelessness exist in your community

Consider making some changes to the way you do business.

Based on the needs and barriers in the community, what changes can you make in the way you do business? Are there potential cross-agency collaboration and funding opportunities available?

Think about how the homeless service providers can be of assistance in return.

What assistance could you use from the homeless service providers and other local continua members? What issues are you struggling with?

Why Conservatives Should Care About Homelessness in Wisconsin

Representative Jim Steineke, Majority Leader, Wisconsin State Assembly



In April, Representative Steineke addresses the media at the Capitol to announce the introduction of a package of bills to address homelessness in Wisconsin.

omelessness in Wisconsin has traditionally been touted as both an urban issue and one that falls left-of-center. Panhandling on busy city streets and providing free resources have been at the center of an underwhelmingly narrow conversation at the state level on how to address the issue of homelessness.

As the Wisconsin Assembly moved into its 2017-18 legislative session, it became clear that addressing the almost 27,000 people who found themselves without shelter in 2016 needed to be a priority for our caucus. Data collected through the state-sponsored Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) shed light onto how the problem of homelessness is an expansive and expensive issue, highlighting that almost 20,000 people used emergency shelter services in 2016.

In the Assembly Republican Forward Agenda, we laid out a roadmap for the 2017-18 legislative session. It includes a plan to dedicate local, state, and federal resources, in conjunction with private sector partnerships, to yield real and lasting aid for the homeless population. As a caucus, we realized that by making changes in how we address homelessness, we could make long-term improvements for people experiencing homelessness, with the end goal being true independence.

Caring for our constituents is something I am tasked with as a state representative. Another of my responsibilities, though, is to be mindful of how we spend taxpayer money. Often as law-makers, we find ourselves burdened by choosing between cost and aid. In the case of homelessness issues, this burden does not exist. People cannot contribute to our economy without a stable home, meaning helping people find permanent employment and housing actually helps our economy and state.

On April 12, myself and Representatives Pronschinske (R-Mondovi), Rodriguez (R-Oak Creek) and Snyder (R-Schofield) introduced legislation that will implement first steps towards helping to end and prevent homelessness in Wisconsin. In our package of bills, we address staffing, resources, housing, and employment concerns that will help take a more concerted approach towards helping the homeless population.

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REP Jim Steineke

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My colleagues' bills provide restructuring of resources and opportunities for employment and housing for the homeless population. My bill, Assembly Bill 234, takes a high-level look at Wisconsin's homelessness services and the processes for providing care. Upon speaking with experts close to this cause, it became clear that coordination is needed between state and federal agencies that provide

homelessness services. My bill creates an Interagency Council on Homelessness within the Department of Administration, consisting of decision makers from the state agencies and organizations that provide homelessness services, along with a designee appointed by Governor Walker.

On May 2, I am proud to report that the Assembly passed each bill from the legislative package, with wide, bipartisan support. Carrie Poser, Director of the Balance of State Continuum of Care, and Joe Volk, Executive Director at the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness, have both been supporters of the initial bills, touting them as first steps that will make a difference for the homeless population and service providers. As these bills head to the Senate for consideration, we in the Assembly are committed to dedicating attention and resources to this issue.

The bills complement and echo the larger-spend items included in the executive budget proposal. It has been a pleasure working with Lieutenant Governor Rebecca Kleefisch, who is passionate about making a difference in our state. This collaboration has been a good example of multiple branches of government working together to fix a problem. Without this part-



nership between different wings of the Capitol building, I am not sure we can make a large impact on homelessness services.

We look to the future better poised to invest in evidence-based, effective solutions. The new statewide director of homelessness services position that is proposed in Assembly Bill 234 will be able to focus on innovative approaches and will be equipped

with the resources and knowledge to follow through on implementing those ideas. We will be looking for creative ways to increase the availability of and access to affordable housing. We will try and replicate effective local partnerships on a much larger scale. And, of course, we will be asking for input from experts in the field whose jobs we hope to make easier.

As with our first round of bills, enlisting the help of people closest to homelessness services will be instrumental in making the most meaningful impacts to ending and preventing homelessness in Wisconsin. Throughout the summer, my colleagues and I will be meeting with homeless advocates throughout the state, hearing firsthand how state government can assist them in achieving their goals.

Moving forward, I am encouraged by these initial first steps we have made in the Assembly, while also knowing that there is more to be done. As I hear more from constituents, the homeless population, and homeless service providers and advocates, I am reminded of the need in Wisconsin to address homelessness head-on. I look forward to a coordinated effort in continuing to make meaningful changes to end and prevent homelessness in Wisconsin.

AN OVERVIEW Homelessness in Wisconsin

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Services in Wisconsin

To receive federal funds, individual organizations providing homeless services must belong to a Continuum of Care, or CoC. In Wisconsin, there are four CoCs: Dane, Milwaukee, Racine, and the Balance of State. The CoC brings together people working in a variety of fields for the purposes of addressing homelessness and developing a community-wide plan. This should include: law enforcement, social service providers, mental health agencies, public housing authorities, school districts, victim service providers, faith-based organizations, businesses, government agencies, and non-profit homeless providers. HUD requires CoCs to carry out a variety of tasks, such as setting policies and service standards, using coordinated entry, conducting point-in-time counts, monitoring and evaluating performance, conducting a gaps analysis, and system coordination.

So What Works?

Over the last several years many providers have radically altered the way they do business by embracing a housing first philosophy, tailoring housing assistance

and services to people's unique needs and strengths, and prioritizing the most vulnerable. After several years of seeing homelessness decrease by less than 6% per year, in 2017 we saw a 13.65% decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness in Wisconsin. We are on the right track, but we still need to do more.

Implement Housing Models that Work

Housing First is an approach to homeless assistance that recognizes that all people are housing ready. Programs operating under Housing First principles help individuals and families obtain permanent housing without preconditions such as sobriety, medication compliance, or completing other programs. The programs understand that people are better able to address underlying issues of mental health, addiction, trauma, unemployment, etc. when they have a safe and stable home.

Housing First is a core component of two types of programs identified by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as best practices: Permanent Supportive Housing and Rapid

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Advocates on the local level are constantly striving for collaboration, creative solutions, and making the most with what they have to serve the most vulnerable populations.

Re-Housing. Permanent Supportive Housing is designed for people with a pattern of homelessness that is chronic, defined as having a disability and spending 12 or more months in emergency shelters or on the streets. Rapid Re-Housing is designed for people who need less intensive services. Research conducted by HUD in the Family Options Study shows that the most successful way to end homelessness among families with children is to get them into permanent housing and help them stay there.¹²

Collaboration & Leveraging Resources

Often, service providers work within a silo. This results in duplication of services and an inefficient use of funds and resources. A key to ending homelessness in Wisconsin is to bring the right people to the table. With cross-agency, cross-disciplinary collaboration, we can pool our knowledge, strengths, and resources to address the barriers and issues resulting in and from homelessness, and find housing solutions for those experiencing homelessness in an efficient and effective manner. The proposed Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness is a good example of leveraging resources to improve services. Advocates on the local level are constantly striving for collaboration, creative solutions, and making the most with what they have to serve the most vulnerable populations. It is equally imperative that at the state level decision makers are invested in a similar process.

Ending homelessness is an achievable goal. We just need the right people, resources, an investment in permanent housing strategies, and a commitment from state and local leaders to join forces with the local homeless providers and partners. Together, we can ensure those 5,000 people will have safe, stable, and permanent homes.

About the Author

Carrie Poser is the Director of the Balance of State Continuum of Care, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The purpose of the organization is to ensure efficient and effective delivery of housing and supportive services to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and provide leadership to the 21 local homeless coalitions that cover the Balance of State territory. Our goal is to end homelessness in Wisconsin.

Endnotes

- 1 January 2017 Point-In-Time data, State of Wisconsin
- 2 Institute for Community Alliances: www.icalliances.org/wis-consin-annual-report-dashboard
- 3 January 2017 Point-In-Time data, State of Wisconsin
- 4 HUD: The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 (November 2016) https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf
- 5 HUD: The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 2 (October 2016) https://www.hu-dexchange.info/onecpd/assets/File/2015-AHAR-Part-2.pdf
- 6 Institute for Community Alliances, State of Wisconsin, 2016 Annual Report www.icalliances.org
- 7 HUD: The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 (November 2016) https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf
- 8 January 2017 Point-In-Time data, State of Wisconsin
- 9 Institute for Community Alliances, State of Wisconsin, 2016 Annual Report www.icalliances.org
- 10 Homelessness In America: Overview of Data and Causes (updated January 2015) https://www.nlchp.org/documents/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet
- 11 January 2017 Point-In-Time data, State of Wisconsin
- 12 HUD: The Family Options Study https://www.huduser.gov/portal/family_options_study.html

WISCONSIN'S Efforts to End Homelessness

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The Council is formulating statewide policies with the goal of ending homelessness in Wisconsin. The policies will strategically leverage resources from multiple departments to address the issues that lead to homelessness and address the barriers preventing those persons from attaining housing. The Council has identified the following populations as its top priorities:

- Reducing veteran homelessness
- Reducing chronic homelessness
- Reducing unaccompanied youth homelessness

According to the United States Interagency Council, research indicates that permanent supportive housing, using the Housing First approach, is the most effective solution for addressing veteran and chronic homelessness. The Housing First model incorporates a variety of supportive services that are designed to meet individual needs, are flexible, and are voluntary. Housing First Programs focus on housing stability as the foundation for addressing other needs related to mental health, substance use, health, and employment or income. This approach minimizes barriers to housing, removes pre-conditions to entry such as sobriety, medication compliance, or income. Programs assist participants with moving into permanent housing quickly and then provide intensive supportive services, as

needed, to help the participant maintain housing stability. This represents a shift from screening vulnerable people with the greatest challenges to housing success out to screening and prioritize them into programs. The state of Utah has incorporated this approach with great success. Utah found that giving people supportive housing cost the system about half as much as leaving the homeless to live on the street.²

Recently introduced legislation would create a statutorily-defined Interagency Council on Homelessness consisting of both state agency designees, as well as partner organizations. It is expected that it would be chaired by Lieutenant Governor Rebecca Kleefisch, who has been a strong leader on this issue. The legislation represents a landmark event for the state as it establishes the necessary framework to elevate the issue of homelessness in Wisconsin and presents the opportunity to elevate and advance the work done by the current Council.

Endnotes

1 National Alliance to End Homelessness. "The State of Homelessness in America 2016." National Alliance to End Homelessness. April 2016. http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/2016%20State%20Of%20Homelessness.pdf
2 Carrier, Scott. "Room for Improvement." Mother Jones. Web. March/April 2015. http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/02/housing-first-solution-to-homelessness-utah

