

January 24, 2012

Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services

RE: Public hearing on the subject of homeless services

Carrie Michel-Wynne; Housing Director YWCA of Rochester and Monroe County

Assembly Woman Titus and other distinguished Assembly committee members, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about solutions to end homelessness and the recent implementation and effectiveness of the solutions to end homelessness program and the New York State Supportive Housing Program.

My involvement in homeless services is deep rooted. I myself have experienced homelessness and have spent the last 20 years providing services to others who have experienced the same symptom of unfortunate circumstances. There is no easy solution to ending homelessness but I am relieved to see that our State government is working to consolidate funding streams and has invested resources in permanent solutions.

While it is too soon to see the full impact of the newly consolidated funding streams, it is a relief that resources that have provided the homeless supportive, affordable housing were not completely eliminated. We are very appreciative that the OTDA has the authority and flexibility to fund programs that will have the biggest impact on those experiencing homelessness.

Most advocates would say that we are not interested in managing the homeless situation in our community but are looking for real solutions to end homelessness.

Most community providers receiving HUD funds are using a Homeless Management Information System to track services to homeless individuals. I am very excited that anyone who received OTDA funds will be asked to do use an approved HMIS data collection system. The first step in addressing homelessness is to understand how prevalent the situation is and what solutions are working. Using HMIS will allow the local continuums of care to have the most accurate data, identify funding priorities and most importantly help reduce duplication of effort.

Several years ago my program moved every one of our programs into a HMIS system, regardless of funding. In the first year our data quality improved drastically and staff satisfaction increased because staff were able to focus on the needs of the clients and reduce re-work. Reporting is a breeze and there are several tools available to measure the quality of services. It is also beneficial to help track an individual's progress through the continuum of care.

Some of the best practices that exist in addressing homelessness is to have an adequate stock of affordable housing with person-centered support services. Most individuals who have experienced homelessness need some kind of support to overcome this challenge. The level of support services will differ from person to person, but it is critical components if we expect to rapidly re-house an individual or help a person who has struggled with housing maintain their home. This is why being person-centered is important. Having a person choose the type of housing they could most benefit from with the type of services they need will ensure we match them with the best services the first time around. Forcing a person to take the first available apartment on an apartment list will likely lead them back into a homeless situation in the future.

A housing first model is the best example of a best practice. If someone has a home, generally everything else they will need can be obtained over time. Many people with mental health, physical health, substance abuse issues, etc. will need support for a long time. Maybe forever. The bottom line is they should have dignified housing of their choice. It is much more fiscally responsible to find a person a home with support services opposed to relying on costly hospital beds, institutions, jails, shelters, etc.

In our experience, support service staff do not need to be overly qualified. They just need to know how to navigate a complex system. Our best support staff have been former consumers or peer advocates. Most individuals who have overcome a challenge are delighted to give back and they are automatically regarded as an authority on the subject. Keeping support systems realistic and not requiring staff to have complex degrees and credentials is something to keep in mind for the future. This does not mean staff don't require competency development opportunities. Allowing for trainings and professional development in State contracts is a great investment.

The economy is not recovering fast enough; although homeless numbers have declined in the past year we are convinced it is because of the recovery act funds that were allocated to our communities. Those funds are going to dry up quickly and we are likely to see a surge in homelessness. Unemployment is up, more people are doubled up in homes and those who are severely housing burdened is also increasing. More people than ever are spending more than 50% of their income on housing.

Several Monroe County programs, including two highly successful YWCA programs did not receive funding this year as a result of the fiscal shortfall. Many of the programs had incredible outcomes and focused on long-term solutions to homelessness. Unfortunately these programs leveraged some HUD funded programs, so any effort we made to leverage State and Federal resources was compromised.

The consolidation of homeless programs into two and requiring specific outcomes for programs is a step in the right direction. Having communities use HMIS will allow for us to develop adequate single points of access and deliver services more effectively and efficiently. However, if we expect to solve this problem opposed to manage it, there needs to be real solutions with real investments at the State level.

Thank you for all of your attention to this important issue and your commitment to all ensuring we find solutions to homelessness.