

**RURAL HOMELESS  
INITIATIVE OF  
SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL OHIO:**

**A National Model  
for Planning to End  
Rural Homelessness**

**Grantee Convening - May 21, 2008**

**Executive Summary**

## INTRODUCTION

The Osteopathic Heritage Foundations are pleased to share this executive summary of findings from the May 21, 2008 convening of coalitions participating in the Rural Homelessness Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO) Initiative. The convening was designed as a peer-to-peer learning opportunity to discuss successes and challenges with the early implementation of grants awarded to prevent homelessness in rural counties. The convening was attended by 40 individuals.

The goal of RHISCO is to improve the health and quality of life for homeless individuals, families, and those at-risk of homelessness through comprehensive and coordinated plans to help end and prevent homelessness in the Foundations' seventeen (17) county service area. During the Capacity Building phase in 2006, the Foundation provided funding to help counties develop housing coalitions, assess the needs of at-risk and homeless individuals, and develop plans to prevent and end homelessness. In addition, the National Alliance to End Homelessness was engaged as a consultant to provide technical assistance to the counties as they developed their plans and created and/or enhanced their coalitions.

Phase One Implementation grants in the amount of \$744,000 were approved by the Foundations in December 2007, inclusive of Fannie Mae funding, in support of twelve (12) implementation proposals representing the following counties: Athens/Hocking, Delaware/Union, Fairfield, Fayette, Jackson/Meigs, Knox, Licking, Madison, Perry, Pickaway, Ross and Washington/Morgan. The Foundations focused investments on four (4) overarching themes (prevention, affordable housing, provider coordination, and data systems) that were identified in the Capacity Building phase. Funding from the Foundation was designed to achieve outcomes related to housing stability, economic independence, family and/or individual self-sufficiency, access to and coordination of mainstream services, agency/community capacity building, and community support in the region.

Findings selected for the Executive Summary represent only the highlights of all the accomplishments achieved by participating RHISCO counties and their many partners in southeast and central Ohio. For more information about the RHISCO project and the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations, visit the Foundations' website at [www.osteopathicheritage.org](http://www.osteopathicheritage.org) or contact Terri Donlin Huesman, Director of Programs at (614) 737-4359 or [tdonlin@ohf-ohio.org](mailto:tdonlin@ohf-ohio.org).

## SUCCESSSES

Grantees were asked to share positive developments and successes from the early implementation period of the grant programs. The Osteopathic Heritage Foundations appreciates the dedication of grantees and the collaboration with community partners to develop these initiatives.

*Preventing Homelessness for Families* – Pickaway and Fayette counties applied for and received a \$300,000 grant from the Ohio Department of Development Housing Trust Fund and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) for a pilot program designed to prevent family homelessness. Of the five grants awarded for pilot projects, the Fayette and Pickaway project was the only rural program funded. The pilot program will provide home-based case management for families who are in imminent danger of losing their housing, \$1,000 rent subsidies, and six months of intensive case management. The grant program required a minimum of 30 families served every six months. To meet the minimum client requirements, Fayette and Pickaway partnered to expand the geographic service area. Coalitions should consider such partnerships to increase their competitiveness in local, state and federal funding.

*Rapid Re-Housing for Families* – Knox County's grant is helping families who are victims of domestic violence move out of the shelter and into permanent housing quickly. The domestic violence shelter in Knox County has limited capacity and needed help with placing women into permanent housing. Funding from the Foundation will provide rent subsidies and case management to help families move from the shelter to housing faster. Assistance is offered with a 15-month time limit.

*Housing Transitional Youth and Adults* – Athens and Hocking counties are working with the Corporation for Supportive Housing to provide housing and support for transitional youth (those who are aging out of foster care) and single adults who experience a catastrophic loss. These populations are not served by other funding pools because they are only considered to be at-risk of homelessness. Foundation funding was used to leverage funds from the Ohio Housing Trust Fund to provide case management and rent subsidies. The program will work with youth for up to 18 months as they become self-sufficient or move into subsidized housing.

*Improving Access to Jobs and Services* – Jackson and Meigs counties have been able to increase access to employment and services for homeless persons by creating additional transportation

through partnerships with the Jackson, Meigs, and Gallia County Departments of Job Family Services. Jackson-Vinton Community Action, Inc. used funding from the Foundation as match money for a transportation grant through the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program. The transportation service employs customers of Job and Family Services as drivers.

*Sharing Housing and Vacancy Information* – Fairfield County re-designed the “Project House Call” program with funding from the Foundation. Project House Call is a rental listing data program that is updated daily and distributed to 28 service agencies who share the information with their staff and clients. Foundation funding was used to create a staff position to update the housing listings and work with landlords to provide housing for homeless families and individuals. The rental listing is available on the web through Information and Referral services, which will soon allow landlords to update the list directly. Jackson and Meigs counties are gathering information on assistance programs in the area to develop a database for coalition members and other groups to use and an “800 Housing Hotline.” The database and hotline will be available to anyone who needs to find housing.

*Partnering with Landlords* – Fairfield County’s Project House Call developed training to share the benefits of housing programs with landlords, and to receive landlord input about support needed to maintain tenants in housing. Landlords discovered that they can save time and money by working together with agencies to avoid the eviction process with good tenants. The program is coordinated with Fairfield Metropolitan Housing Authority.

*Improving Financial Skills* – Madison County’s RHISCO project is developing a financial literacy program for people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, including those living in poverty. The Community Action Organization of Delaware, Madison, and Union Counties used grant funding to develop an instructional video and workbook to help families and individuals maintain housing, repair credit, and build a stronger financial future. Licking County’s coalition has developed the “Positive Balance” program to teach budgeting skills, debt management, and how to work with landlords to avoid eviction.

*Building Capacity for Homeless Coalitions* – New partners are joining homeless coalitions. The Salvation Army in Ross County is a new partner in their coalition, and Jackson, Gallia, Meigs counties are pleased to report that the Director of the Gallia County Job and Family Services joined the homeless coalition, helping to bring transportation resources for homeless persons seeking employment and support services. Both Knox and Perry counties have added Legal Aid representatives to their coalitions. Several coalitions have formed as sub-committees of existing

Family and Children First Councils, including Fairfield County and Union County. The Councils offer fiscal agency and accountability without creating another bureaucracy. Fayette County's coalition held a "Faith Day" for ministers and churches with the goal of coordinating assistance with food, clothing, and other support.

*Providing Education for Coalitions, Consumers, and Other Systems of Care* – Athens and Hocking counties developed a housing and resource guidebook for coalition members and other systems of care. The guidebook includes screening tools to determine the severity and conditions of the housing crisis. They are creating a "Housing 101" manual to direct people to housing, including resources for families and transitional youth. Union County provided two full days of training for agency staff. The United Way of Union County provided a grant to help fund some of the training along with RHISCO funds. Over 120 people attended, including faith-based groups, law enforcement, and social service agencies. The training explained the "No Wrong Door" model and included training on customer service and how to serve homeless individuals and families effectively.

*Building Advocacy to Address Poverty and Homelessness* – The Madison County housing coalition joined with the Coalition for Responsible Lending, COHHIO, and other groups in meeting with the Chairman of the Ohio House of Representatives Financial Institutions Committee, the Honorable Chris Widener, to advocate for changes to payday lending in Ohio. Rep. Widener's leadership led to the passage of the payday lending bill, which places a 28% cap on annual interest rates for payday lenders. Ross County's Point-in-Time Count of homeless persons engaged 46 volunteers to assist with the count. A local radio station provided airtime to publicize the event, and the local newspaper also took part in the count, with reporters giving the event front-page exposure.

## CHALLENGES

Grantees were also asked to share some of the initial challenges they experienced with implementing programs and initiatives to prevent homelessness. The complex nature of rural homelessness is reflected in the challenges described, and will require ongoing effort and collaboration to resolve.

*Local System Participation* – Some local system partners have been reluctant to join rural homeless/housing coalitions or collaborate on housing and service programs due to limited staff time and lack of match funding for grant programs. Some housing authorities do not have the

capacity to manage additional housing vouchers for Shelter Plus Care programs. Mental health and recovery boards must provide match funding for Medicaid services delivered in Shelter Plus Care and other programs. Although the benefits of providing housing and services for homeless persons usually offset the cost of institutional and emergency care, the "front-end" cost of programs remains an issue to work through in some counties.

*Housing Options* – Rural counties do not have as many housing options as their urban counterparts. There are fewer apartments, boarding homes, group homes, and supportive housing units available for homeless families and individuals. Furthermore, an arrest record, nonpayment of rent, and credit issues make it nearly impossible to find housing. Fewer landlords and housing options in rural counties make this problem more difficult to overcome.

*Accurate Data on Homelessness* – Rural counties do not use consistent methods of documenting the number of homeless or at-risk persons served or the kinds of services provided for them. The annual count of homeless persons is more difficult in rural areas since there are fewer shelters and less "street" homelessness. Not all providers in rural counties use the Homeless Management Information System to capture service data, making comparison and measurement of progress more difficult.

*Staffing and Training* – Staff turnover in rural counties is more disruptive than in larger systems. Losing one knowledgeable staff person creates a void because fewer people work on housing issues in rural systems. Staff turnover also means more time and effort must be spent in training to bring new staff members up to speed.

## MOVING FORWARD

The Osteopathic Heritage Foundations encourages coalitions and grantees to seek additional funding for programs that address homeless prevention. Funding for rent subsidy programs that help prevent homelessness and maintain housing for low-income families is very useful in rural areas. Funding for supportive services to complement existing programs is also needed. Additional investment in data collection methods for rural counties, including HMIS systems and point-in-time counts, will help define needs and measure progress more accurately.

Coalitions should consider partnering with other counties for a multi-county or regional approach to increase competitiveness in state and federal funding. Potential funding sources include federal demonstration grants from SAMHSA, HUD, TANF, HHS, VA, and grants from the Ohio's Housing Trust Fund, local CDBG and housing funding, and other foundations that support homeless prevention programs.

RHISCO projects are encouraged to document success in detail, including the process used to develop programs as well as outcomes that show promise with preventing homelessness. The Osteopathic Heritage Foundations will share "best practices" developed through RHISCO with its partners and constituents, and encourages grantees to share results with colleagues at state and national conferences in the future.