

RURAL HOMELESS
INITIATIVE OF
SOUTHEAST AND
CENTRAL OHIO:



*A National Model
for Planning to End
Rural Homelessness*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JANUARY 2008

RURAL HOMELESS INITIATIVE OF SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL OHIO

OSTEOPATHIC HERITAGE FOUNDATIONS

The mission of the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations is to improve the health and quality of life in the community through education, research and service consistent with the osteopathic philosophy of medical care. The Foundations advance the mission through three primary areas of funding interest: *osteopathic medical education*, *osteopathic biomedical research*, and *community health and quality of life*. The community health and quality of life investments are concentrated in eighteen Ohio counties, with targeted osteopathic medical education and research investments throughout the United States.

Given the prominence of the Foundations with regard to osteopathic medical care and community health and quality of life, the local, state and national responsibilities that accompany advancing the mission are significant. The Foundations will maintain and enhance local and national partnerships designed to perpetuate the heritage as the pre-eminent foundations supporting the principles of osteopathic medicine – its health delivery philosophy, educational processes and research.



THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance works collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help communities achieve their goal of ending homelessness. Guiding our work is *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*. This plan identifies our nation's challenges in addressing the problem and lays out practical steps our nation can take to change its present course and truly end homelessness within ten years.

RURAL HOMELESS INITIATIVE OF SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL OHIO



LETTER FROM NAN ROMAN

PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

Although homelessness is typically associated with large urban centers, sadly it is a problem that plagues small towns and rural communities as well. Rural homelessness, though also driven by the lack of affordable housing and inadequate service infrastructures, is less understood than its urban counterpart and presents a unique set of challenges. Two years ago the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations joined together to explore the nature of homelessness, and its solutions, in seventeen counties in rural Ohio. The goal of the partnership, called RHISCO (Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio), was twofold: to help the counties create plans to end homelessness, and to deepen our own understanding of solutions to the problem.

As this report will show, both of these goals have been met. The seventeen counties in the RHISCO region, by developing ten year plans, bringing new stakeholders to the table, and collaborating with neighboring communities, are better equipped to end homelessness in Southeast and Central Ohio. And the RHISCO Project is serving as a national model, leading to new insights about the nature of and solutions to rural homelessness. The impact of the RHISCO Project has already begun to extend far beyond Southeast and Central Ohio.

The hard work of the RHISCO Project was accomplished by hundreds of individuals from the seventeen counties who added countless hours to their already busy days to contribute, plan, confer, and ultimately commit to new strategies and partnerships. Their hard work, always supported and encouraged by the dedicated leadership and staff of the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations, is reflected in the following report. Those of us at the National Alliance to End Homelessness are honored to have worked closely with them, and our many other state and national partners, in this unique and innovative endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nan Roman", positioned above the printed name.

Nan Roman

RURAL HOMELESS INITIATIVE OF SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL OHIO



LETTER FROM RICK VINCENT

PRESIDENT/CEO OF THE OSTEOPATHIC HERITAGE FOUNDATIONS

In 2006, the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations and the National Alliance to End Homelessness launched the planning phase of the Rural Homeless Initiative in Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO). Over the past two years, countless RHISCO partners, including local housing coalitions, service providers, funders and advocacy groups have contributed to the initial success of this multi-year, multi-phase Foundation funding priority. RHISCO partners are commended for their efforts to coordinate local planning and develop strategies designed to prevent homelessness in central and southeastern Ohio.

Under leadership from the Alliance, the planning process identified four overarching themes critical to successful plans to end homelessness in rural communities, including prevention, affordable housing, data systems and provider coordination. As a result, beginning in 2008, the Foundations will provide additional funding to local coalitions as they implement local strategies promoting homeless prevention and self-sufficiency of at-risk individuals and families to maintain quality, stable housing.

The Foundations welcome your review of "RHISCO: A National Model for Planning to End Homelessness" and we encourage replication of successful strategies to prevent homelessness in other rural communities across the country. As work continues on the RHISCO Initiative, the Foundations will continue to disseminate outcomes and learnings to benefit advocacy and public policy efforts to prevent and end homelessness in rural communities.

The Foundations extend sincere appreciation and gratitude to the National Alliance to End Homelessness and each participating RHISCO coalition for their leadership, contributions and dedication to preventing rural homelessness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Vincent". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard A. Vincent



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2005, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations, and 17 rural counties in Southeast and Central Ohio have worked together on the Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio, known as the RHISCO Project. This report documents the first two years of the project.

The goals of RHISCO are to improve the lives of low-income, poorly housed people in the region covered by the project, by reducing the incidence of homelessness; to demonstrate the feasibility of developing and implementing plans to end homelessness in a rural region marked by poverty; and to develop models that will be useful in other rural areas around the country. Over the past two years the counties have, with financial support from the Foundations and technical assistance from the Alliance, organized themselves to develop local plans to end homelessness.

Rural areas generally have not been quick to follow the national trend of developing local plans to end homelessness. This report provides insight into the reasons this might be true. It also shows, however, that progress is indeed possible with the right kinds of supports.

This report includes an overview of the issue of homelessness as it applies to rural communities generally, and to the rural portions of Southeast and Central Ohio in particular. It includes demographic descriptions of each of the seventeen counties that participated, allowing the reader to understand the diversity within the region, and to identify areas that are similar in various characteristics to other rural areas that are considering replication. The report briefly describes the progress that was made over the two-year planning period in each community. Finally, this report identifies overall lessons from the experience, including important models that were addressed by many of the communities, barriers that all the communities faced, promising developments, and key findings.

RURAL HOMELESSNESS

Perhaps contrary to various stereotypes, rural areas in the United States are diverse in a number of ways: economically, racially, and demographically. Poverty, however, remains extant in rural America – children in rural areas are substantially more likely to be poor than in urban areas. As such, they and their families are likely to be at risk of homelessness.

Rural homelessness, however, is little researched and poorly understood. The most severe forms of homelessness, involving people sleeping outdoors, are more likely to be hidden than in cities – people sleep in the woods instead of on doorsteps. Because the number of homeless

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people is small (although it may be a relatively large percentage of the population), communities often have difficulty recognizing the problem for what it is.

THE RURAL HOMELESS INITIATIVE OF SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL OHIO

Origins and goals – The RHISCO Project arose from the coalescing of two important national movements. The first is a new approach to the problem of homelessness. Since 2000, over 300 cities, counties and states have begun to develop concrete plans to solve the problem of homelessness by preventing people from becoming homeless, and rapidly rehousing those who do become homeless.

The second is the growing trend toward more active philanthropy. Increasingly, foundations and other charitable giving programs have become key participants in planning and implementation efforts to address vexing issues in communities they serve, taking an active hand in project design, implementation, and evaluation.

The Osteopathic Heritage Foundations primary service area includes 17 counties of in Southeast and Central Ohio. In 2005, the Foundations undertook an environmental scan of the region, and found that homelessness was an issue of growing concern among knowledgeable leaders, who were frustrated by lack of resources, barriers, and lack of recognition by the general population.

In response, the Foundations undertook the RHISCO Project, with three specific goals:

- Catalyze local plans to end homelessness;
- Foster regional coordination and collaboration across the counties;
- Eventually culminate in a regional plan to end homelessness.

The Foundations engaged the National Alliance to End Homelessness to assist the counties with the development of their plans and to help them and the Foundations prepare for implementation of the local plans. The Alliance brought to the RHISCO Project a concern for rural homelessness on a national scale, and a desire to undertake a model for planning to end rural homelessness. The RHISCO region was well suited for this, due to the range of economic circumstances and the varied levels of capacity present in the 17-county region.

The RHISCO region – The 17 RHISCO counties cover about 20% of Ohio's geographic area. Nine of the counties are in Appalachia, the other eight are in the plains and some include suburbs of Columbus. The population of the individual counties varies from a high of 130,000 residents to a low of fewer than 15,000 residents.

The economic differences between the counties can be measured in a number of ways. In terms of major industries, while farming is important in many of the communities, none of these



counties have a farm-dependent economy, as measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Eleven are dependent on manufacturing, one each is dependent on mining, government, and services, and the remaining three have enough economic diversity to not be dependent on any one industry.

Median incomes range from a high of over \$67,000 annually, to a low of \$13,352. Unemployment rates range from 4% to 10.8%. Poverty rates range from 3.9% to 20%. There are high rates of housing cost burden in a majority of these counties. Finally, rates of high school and post-secondary degree completion fall well below those of the state as a whole in a majority of counties in the RHISCO Project.

Structure and process of RHISCO – The RHISCO Project got under way with an agreement among the Foundations, the Alliance, and the 17 counties. The Foundations provided initial grants to each of the counties to offset costs of planning, such as travel, meeting expenses and staff.

The partners agreed that the RHISCO Project would proceed in five phases:

- *Assessment* – Information gathering about local circumstances related to homelessness.
- *Summits* – Bringing stakeholders together for networking, collaboration and training.

- *Planning* – Developing local ten year plans for each of the counties.
- *Implementation* – Putting the plans into effect locally, with increasing levels of regional collaboration.
- *Evaluation, Knowledge Building, and Dissemination* – Evaluation of process and results, consolidation of learnings, and national dissemination of findings.

Alliance and Foundation Activities – The Foundations provided the Alliance with funding to hire staff and consultants under the direction of the Alliance's Center for Capacity Building. In consultation with Foundations staff, this team provided three important services to the counties:

- *Data gathering and assessment capacity.* The Alliance gathered information about the region and the individual counties, to provide background and a starting point for each county's efforts. Among the findings were that most of the counties had some sort of planning body dealing with housing and/or homelessness; that most of the counties had undertaken some effort to quantify the problem of homelessness; and that while there was a range of capacity to address homelessness, for the most part, programs and resources for homeless people were scarce.
- *On the ground one-on-one consultation.* Alliance staff and contractors helped counties individually with a range of tasks,



including coalition building; cultivation of local stakeholders including their recruitment to be part of the effort; identification of best practices in planning and service delivery from around the country that could be considered for replication; development and writing of the actual ten year plan document; identification of and building relationships with potential funding sources.

- *Alliance Conference.* A team of people from the RHISCO counties attended the Alliance's annual national conference on ending homelessness in July, 2007. For the first time, the Alliance's conference included a track on rural homelessness. This provided an opportunity for those working on RHISCO to share information with rural areas around the country.
- *Regional convenings and trainings.* The Alliance staff and consultants organized three regional meetings, two of them in the first six months of 2006, and another in early 2007. These meetings included training for county staff; discussions of common problems and solutions; networking and consensus building around the Project's overall goals; and collaboration building. An explicit purpose was to solidify a sense of the project's regional nature. In addition to these regional convenings, there were other training and information-sharing opportunities provided through conference call and the internet.

In addition, the Foundations committed to supporting the planning efforts and the first year of implementation. As noted above, the Foundations provided capacity building grants of \$15,000 to each county. In 2007, the Foundations began a process of requesting proposals for additional funding to begin implementation of the counties' plans. The two-year planning period of the RHISCO Project concluded with the award of \$744,000 to the counties, \$594,000 provided by the Foundations and \$150,000 provided by Fannie Mae.

FINDINGS

This report includes cross cutting findings related to capacity and other issues; specific promising practices that counties included in their plans; and a discussion of remaining challenges and how they have been addressed to this point.

Cross Cutting Findings – Over the course of the first two years of the RHISCO project, five important lessons became apparent:

6 Rural communities participating in this project were willing to make a sustained commitment of time and energy, showing that they viewed homelessness as a serious problem and its solution worth pursuing.

- Communities vary in their capacity to develop and implement plans to end homelessness.
- Regional themes emerged across



communities: affordable housing, prevention of homelessness through intervention in individual and family crises, prevention of homelessness as an outcome of publicly funded systems, data systems and provider coordination.

- The issues that emerged for the RHISCO counties mirrored issues that are identified by communities around the country, and the solutions are similar although they must be scaled to the size of the community.
- The need for stable permanent housing is key.

Promising Approaches in County Plans – The counties included in their plans specific strategies that are recognized as effective practices nationwide. These include:

- Improve point-in-time counts. To make progress it is important to monitor results. Specific steps can improve the reliability of these counts of homeless people.
- Engage mainstream programs that assist low-income people. A range of government programs exist to help low-income families and individuals. Often these programs have not concentrated on the relationship between housing and the programs' goals. Their participation in planning and implementation makes success more likely.
- Work on finding people housing. The “real estate function” is important. Building relationships with landlords and helping

individuals overcome barriers to housing have proven effective and relatively inexpensive.

- Coordinate resources within the community. The range of services needed by homeless people are seldom available in any one agency in these communities. Agencies need to communicate with the goal of “no wrong door” – homeless people who seek help anywhere in a community will end up getting the help they need.
- Develop supportive housing for those with severe disabilities. In urban areas, supportive housing has proven cost-effective for those who are homeless the longest and have the most severe disabilities. While this part of the homeless population is small, it is necessary to address it, and supportive housing models adapted to the smaller scale of rural communities appear to have promise.
- Improve access to information. People in the community, homeless or not, need to know how to get the kinds of help they need. Public information campaigns can address this need.
- Improve prevention of homelessness. Because of the lack of shelter and other emergency resources for people once they become homeless, prevention is especially important. This involves crisis intervention and work with mainstream programs to monitor housing status and plan for housing as part of discharge from institutions.



- Promote intraregional collaboration. Different kinds of resources exist in different counties within the region. People move within the region to work, shop, receive services and find housing. A number of cooperative ventures began between counties, and more will be necessary as implementation proceeds.

Challenges and Opportunities – The RHISCO Project has faced certain challenges and will continue to do so moving forward. This report focuses on five of these, together with what steps have already been taken to address them:

- Community awareness, misconceptions and moral judgments about homelessness. As is true elsewhere in the country, in the RHISCO region there is a certain amount of negative attitude about homeless people, that they bring their situation upon themselves. There is a lack of awareness about the high rate of disability among the homeless population. There is also a lack of awareness that homelessness exists at all on the part of the general public, despite the awareness within the human services community. Some of the counties have made progress by including opinion leaders to be part of the process of developing plans, including religious leaders, elected officials and journalists.
- Data gathering and its relation to federal homelessness funding. It is widely recognized by people involved in RHISCO that quantifying the problem is important to ensuring progress. The difficulties, however, are many. To some extent they have been exacerbated by the fact that the main motivator around the country for collecting data about homeless people is the homeless program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Further, some of the RHISCO counties do not receive HUD funding, and therefore do not collect data required by HUD. In other counties, the data collected to meet HUD requirements is not the same as the data the community needs to plan and make decisions. Many of the communities involved in RHISCO prioritized improving their capacity to monitor the number of homeless people as well as those at risk of homelessness. Continue progress will be important, and resources are in place to help with this.
- Resource constraints. Staffing for developing a plan is difficult. Especially in the smaller population counties, people involved in social services wear multiple hats, and long-term planning often takes a back seat to addressing emergency needs. The counties nevertheless prioritized RHISCO and sixteen of the seventeen counties completed their plans, through a clear vision of the important benefits that will accrue.
- Lack of affordable housing. Major federal programs to support housing for low-income people have not been funded adequately in recent years even to remain at their existing levels of service, much less



to expand to meet a growing need. While this may be changing somewhat, affordable housing will continue to be in short supply. Many of the county plans focused on staffing to help homeless people and those at risk to make the best use of existing resources, and some of the counties are beginning to access state-level housing resources.

- Difficulty of promoting regional approaches. There is not a history of the 17 counties undertaking major activities as a region as a collaborative. Public sector officials are accountable to people in their respective counties, as are groups that provide services with county or state resources, channeled through the counties. The region-level work carried out as part of RHISCO has begun to foster a better understanding of the benefits to be gained by undertaking efforts beyond county lines, and a regional approach will no doubt expand in the future if proactively pursued.

RHISCO MOVING FORWARD

There is an ongoing commitment to this Project by all involved. The Foundations have committed additional investments to support implementation of county plans. While the intensive role of the Alliance has come to an end, it will continue to provide assistance through its regular activities to help communities address homelessness. Finally, the coun-

ties representatives have expressed an appreciation for the RHISCO planning process and will continue work to end homelessness in their communities.

CONCLUSION

The RHISCO region has made a significant start toward a new approach to homelessness, concentrating on organizing and deploying resources to more effectively prevent homelessness and move people as quickly as possible into housing when homelessness does occur. The county plans that have been developed, and the intra- and inter-county coordination that has already taken place, map the way forward. Focused attention on implementing these plans in the coming years appears likely to bring about significant reductions in homelessness in these communities, and to allow these communities to continue to serve as models for other similar regions throughout rural America.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AVAILABLE

An appendix to this report includes an extensive list of additional documents that can be consulted online http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/tools/rhisco/_appendix to obtain more detailed information about how the project has been carried out over the first two years, what the county plans contained, technical assistance documents and other material.



www.osteopathicheritage.org



www.endhomelessness.org