



## Department of Human Services Housing and Homeless Services Plan 2015-2018

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) has engaged staff across multiple program offices, as well as service providers, consumers and other community stakeholders in a strategic planning process. The goal was to develop a three-year strategic plan to guide the delivery of services to individuals and families, served in all DHS programs, who are homeless or may be at risk for homelessness.

### ♥ Vision

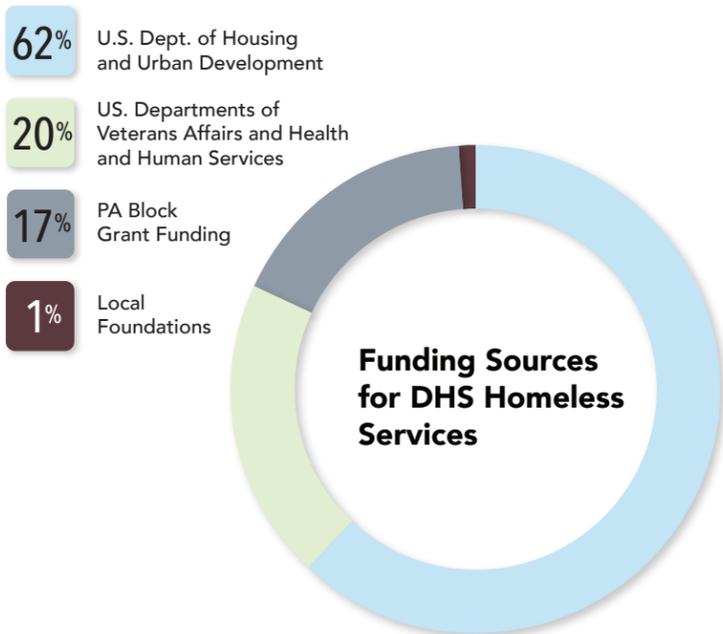
Allegheny County Homeless Services will meet the needs of those experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness through careful matching of responsive, high-quality services to individual needs. To promote the best quality of life for program participants and make the best use of scarce resources, we will focus on prevention, effective communication, and collaboration facilitated by wise use of high-quality data. The system will be infused with a culture of respect.

## What Services are Provided and How they are Funded

DHS Homeless Services uses federal, state and local funds to contract with 36 nonprofit service entities operating nearly 150 distinct programs. These programs, along with other government and social service agencies provide direct service to homeless consumers and comprise a "Continuum of Care", including the following:



Overall the funding for supportive services for homeless people has been decreasing, relative to the total funding available for actual housing.



## Compass Icon: Guiding Principles

Homelessness and housing problems are a community-wide issue, and no one organization can resolve the problem. Therefore DHS will work with multiple stakeholder groups to support a collective approach.

The "housing first" philosophy will inform the development and implementation of all programs. The first concern will be to help individuals and families meet their housing needs, and then immediate attention will be given to the support services needed to ensure their long-term stability and success.

The complex set of issues that lead to housing crises or homelessness will be recognized and addressed through collaboration, extending the expertise of the homeless services staff across the DHS system and minimizing the impact of silos within that system.

Empathy, respect and courtesy, paired with clear and reasonable expectations, will be promoted throughout the system—to participants, providers and staff.

## Individuals at Risk of Homelessness

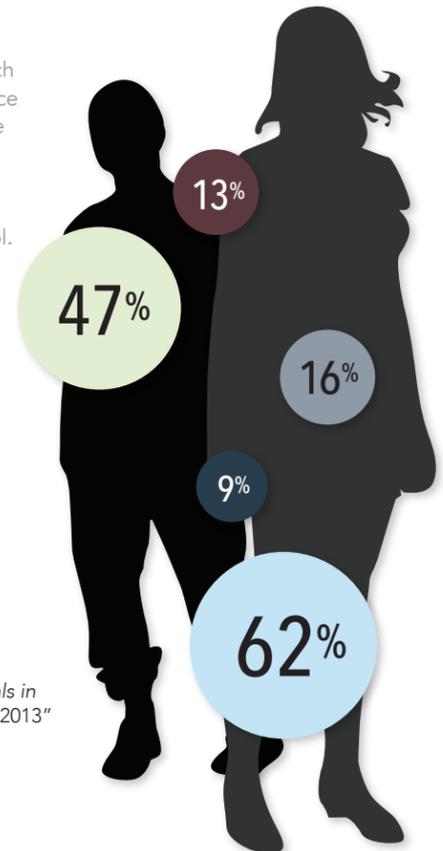
DHS' homeless services focus primarily on those who are currently homeless, but also seek to assist people who are on the verge of becoming homeless. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), more than 94,000 low-income households in Allegheny County were identified as living in overcrowded or substandard housing or paying more than 30 percent of their income toward housing costs. Groups that are of special concern to DHS in this regard include youth aging out of the child welfare system, individuals involved with the mental health, substance abuse or criminal justice systems, and low income older adults. Many of these people are at serious risk of homelessness. DHS currently seeks to assist people in this situation, for example through information and referral services or help with security deposits.

### a Complex Need

Homelessness is a complex problem and is usually interlinked with other individual and societal issues such as unemployment, lack of affordable housing, substance abuse, chronic mental illness, intimate partner violence and poverty. Homelessness also contributes to severe negative outcomes for individuals, families and children, including hunger, inadequate medical care, social isolation, mental illness and absence from school.

Most of the individuals who receive services related to homelessness face multiple challenges and/or work with multiple service providers.

- Mental health diagnosis
- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Chronic homelessness
- Homeless Veterans



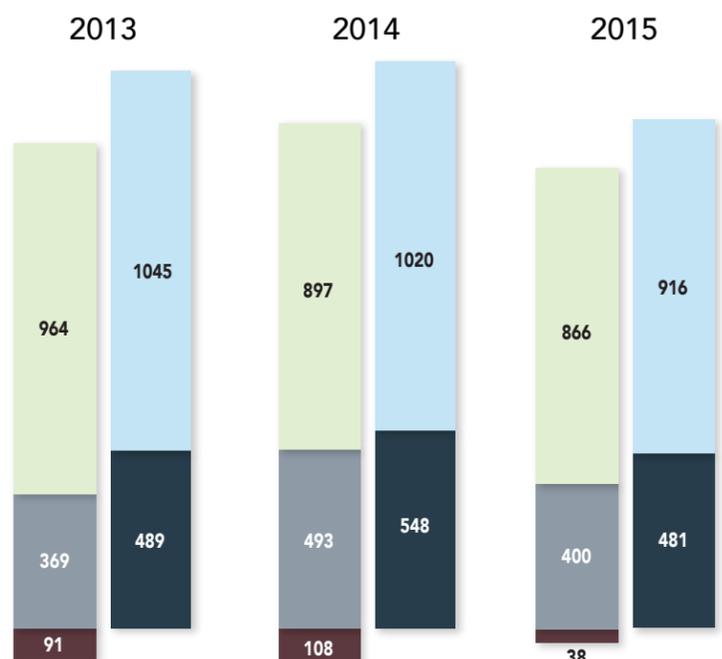
\* "Includes duplicated counts for individuals in multiple categories. Source: DHS Data, 2013"

## Homeless System Capacity

The annual Point in Time (PIT) system surveys indicate Allegheny County's progress in serving people who are homeless. The total homeless population decreased in 2015 from the previous two years. There were enough emergency and transitional shelter beds in the system to serve all of the unsheltered individuals at the Point in Time count in each of the last three years. The number of unsheltered individuals in 2015 dropped dramatically, continuing a 10- year trend.

Most of the 1500 beds added to the system since 2005 have been in permanent or transitional housing. In accordance with HUD policy, Allegheny County is seeking to use permanent housing as its primary approach to combatting homelessness.

The vast majority of individuals whose housing needs are supported by DHS are outside of the homeless system, for example in community living arrangements for people with intellectual or mental health disabilities or for youth in the child welfare system. Therefore, DHS intends to optimize the use of all the resources across the system to further reduce homelessness.





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## Current Status and Opportunities for Improvement

An internal review of homeless services, completed in 2014, provided essential information for the current strategic planning initiative. The following key issues were identified:



Some consumers reported not feeling safe or not being treated with respect and courtesy in shelters. Caregivers are, at times, not sensitive to consumers' trauma experiences.

Consumers reported that the system can be difficult to navigate. They often don't understand the services available to them or how to access them.

Approximately 10% of shelter consumers access homeless services on a regular basis in a "revolving door" pattern.

No information was available on the number of consumers who had been turned away, making it difficult to measure actual need in comparison to bed capacity.

The demand for safe, affordable housing far exceeds the supply. Section 8 housing is 95% occupied and waiting lists are usually closed. Units available through the housing authority are often not in convenient proximity to areas of employment opportunity or support services.

A coordinated intake system is being developed which help individuals more effectively access resources across the system. Eventually the intake system will be able to prioritize service to the most vulnerable people.

Program requirements are not always communicated clearly, causing some people (e.g., those with criminal backgrounds or in recovery from addiction) to encounter barriers to receiving services.

Historically, who is served and what services they receive has been determined by the availability of beds at the site where the individual enters the system. The system has been less able to consider what interventions would best meet consumers' individual needs.

More than 80% of families and 30% of individuals enter shelter from their own apartment or from "doubling up" with family or friends. This may suggest that people at risk are often not getting the help they need to prevent a crisis situation from leading to homelessness.

Program structure can have a negative impact on consumers' chances of success. For example, lack of child care or transportation can make it difficult for recipients to search for employment.

## Strategic Initiatives

A project team with DHS will oversee the implementation of these initiatives and regular progress updates will be provided to stakeholder groups.

1 Coordinate, standardize and evaluate care across all DHS programs and providers serving individuals who are homeless.

Develop and implement standards of care for housing and homeless services, applicable to DHS and all contracted providers.

Develop and implement an objective screening tool to help in making appropriate referrals to providers within a "housing first" model that supports rapid rehousing. Ensure that providers who may be the first contact for consumers as they enter the system use the screening tool.

Improve coordination of homeless services and supports available through DHS, regardless of how someone enters the system.

2 Use creative and collaborative means to increase the number of affordable housing units available to DHS consumers, while supporting development of additional affordable housing units throughout the community.

Position the region to receive additional resources and to make better use of currently available resources through HUD, PHFA tax credits, Section 811, etc. for affordable housing development.

Plan collaboratively with housing authorities, community development corporations, etc.

Engage additional partners as potential landlords.

Secure additional designated Section 8 vouchers for DHS clients.

Provide rent subsidies to individuals ready to move out of more intensive services such as group homes and permanent supportive housing.

Improve the quality and use of affordable housing by pairing effective inspection programs with recruitment and engagement of additional private landlords, and make data on available units readily accessible.

Ensure that consumers who no longer need permanent supported housing services can move into the community with less intensive supports, helping to optimize the use of available services.

3 Provide proactive housing assistance to prevent at-risk individuals from becoming homeless.

Fund, pilot and evaluate approaches to identifying those at risk and provide early assistance before housing becomes a crisis. Adopt needed system changes identified from the pilot projects.

Expand the services designed to meet the housing needs of youth aging out of child welfare services.

Make short-term case managers more widely available, including to those identified as at risk of homelessness.

Identify and address policies that may inadvertently promote homelessness, and increase consumer and landlord awareness of relevant policies.

Engage the broader community in identifying individuals at risk for homelessness and referring them for needed services.

Increase programming that will help individuals to maintain safe, affordable housing.

## Measuring Progress

Allegany County Department of Human Services hopes to achieve documentable system improvements as demonstrated by the following measures:

Among individuals in the DHS system who have been identified as "at risk for homelessness," increase the percentage who move to more stable housing situations

Reduced number of people who are unsheltered

Reduced number of people in emergency shelters

Increased number of individuals who, with DHS assistance, reduce the proportion of their income spent on rent and utilities to below 30%

Increased percentage of DHS consumers who advance toward reaching their housing goals

Increased number of DHS contracted homeless services providers advancing in or meeting quality standards

Increased number of units of affordable housing available to DHS consumers