

June | 2013

*FIVE YEARS IN: AN UPDATE ON THE PALM  
BEACH COUNTY TEN YEAR PLAN TO END  
HOMELESSNESS*

---

PREPARED BY: THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

---

## INTRODUCTION

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (the Alliance) was contracted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the *Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in Palm Beach County, FL*; where implementation of the plan succeeded and fell short; and what the County should prioritize moving forward to ensure maximum impact on ending homelessness. The Alliance was tasked with collecting feedback on these topics from County stakeholders. Gathering feedback included surveys and phone interviews. Phone interviews typically lasted between 20 and 25 minutes and were held from April through June 2013. The surveys were created from templates the Alliance has used with dozens of other communities and then adapted for Palm Beach County. Three different surveys were used to target different audiences: consumers (people experiencing homelessness or who formerly experienced homelessness); community leaders, including executive directors of provider agencies, people serving on the Homeless and Housing Alliance (HHA) Executive Board or the Homeless Advisory Board (HAB), and government staff; and service providers (front-line staff working for provider agencies). Survey responses were anonymous. In total, the Alliance received:

- **38** community leader surveys;
- **39** consumer surveys; and
- **57** service provider surveys.

This report outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the plan's content and its implementation. It also examines the homelessness assistance system as a whole to determine whether to prioritize new strategies to improve system performance. The information presented in the first few sections of this report was used to determine the priorities the community should adopt moving forward, which are presented in the final section of the report. These priorities are:

- Inventory and identify new funding sources for homelessness assistance and especially for rental subsidies
- Restructure governance responsibilities
- Expand performance measurement efforts
- Increase capacity to place and support clients in permanent housing
- Increase the permanent housing supply
- Use coordinated assessment process to create system change

## CONTENT OF THE PLAN

### Strengths

#### *Appropriate Strategies*

The content of the Ten Year Plan has in many ways stood the test of time. The plan speaks to the need for a coordinated assessment process (called universal intake in the plan), interim housing (including emergency shelter), partnerships between providers and mainstream agencies, outreach, and prevention. Additionally, the plan includes content on the need to evaluate progress made on the plan regularly. These elements are still key to developing a high performing homelessness assistance system and are part of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act.

#### *Community Pride*

The Ten Year Plan is a source of great pride in the community. In phone interviews, multiple stakeholders spoke of their belief that the plan had brought many different partners to the table, and 84 percent of community leader respondents said their organization was committed to the plan. Several stakeholders reported that they felt the Board of County Commissioners was engaged with the plan as well.

What are the biggest strengths of the current homeless assistance system as it is now (choose 3)?

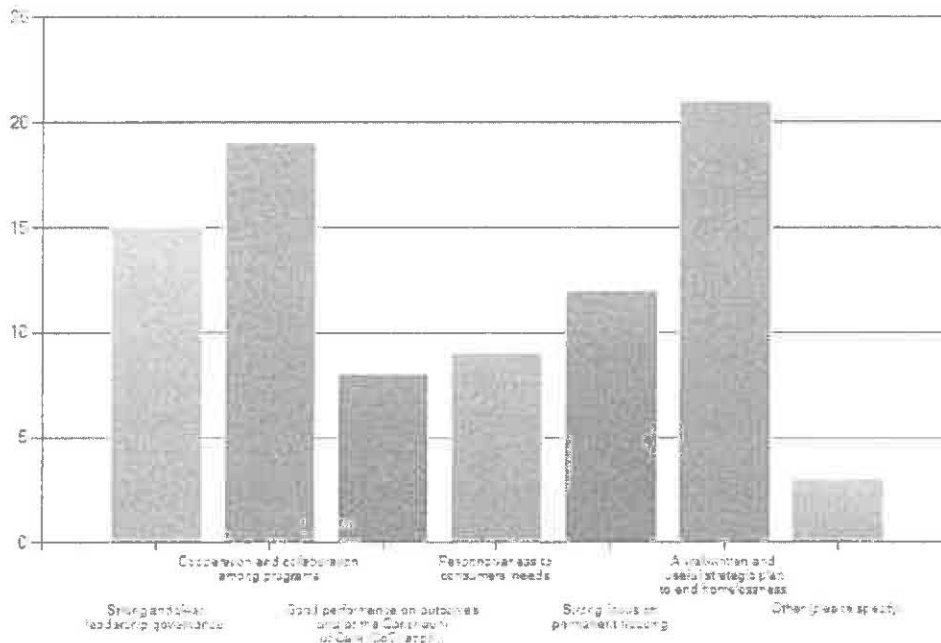


Figure 1: In the surveys, 55 percent of community leader respondents said that a well-written and useful strategic plan was one of the community's biggest strengths.

## **Weaknesses**

It was uncommon that respondents voiced specific criticisms of the content of the plan. A few stakeholders felt that the original plan's goals may have been too ambitious, but still spoke positively of the plan overall.

### *Lack of Specifics Regarding Implementation of Rapid Re-housing*

The plan lacks details on how to implement permanent housing strategies, especially rapid re-housing. Though a Housing First perspective is discussed in the plan, there are few concrete tasks within the plan's goals related to doing housing barrier assessments, properly targeting and administering short- and medium-term subsidies, and engaging landlords, for example.

### *Difficult to Measure Progress*

Several of the tasks within each goal are worded in a way where it is difficult to measure if progress has been made (e.g., "maximize existing resources by coordinating outreach efforts"). The County should consider rewriting these parts of the plan to make it easier to identify when exactly a task has been completed or a goal has been achieved.

### *Lack of Clarity on Governance*

Many different entities are involved with administering homelessness assistance and implementing the plan. Having too many organizations involved with implementing the plan and running the homelessness assistance system can be confusing, dilute authority, and ultimately make the actual implementation of the plan more difficult.

## **PLAN IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Strengths**

#### *The Lewis Center*

Many stakeholders mentioned the result of the universal intake section – the Lewis Center – as a special point of pride. Interviewees were happy that the center opened successfully and that the providers involved have worked together well. The Lewis Center represents partial or total completion of many of the tasks listed in Goal 1 in the plan.



*Figure 2: The Lewis Center opening in 2012.*

#### *Recent Re-entry Projects*

One stakeholder mentioned that two re-entry projects, tied directly to goals within the Ten Year Plan, were new operating in the County.

#### **Weaknesses**

##### *Lack of Ownership of the Plan*

Several stakeholders felt that the current governance structure made it difficult for any one agency to “own” the Ten Year Plan. Additionally, it was mentioned in a few interviews that the plan was not something the community came together to discuss or reflect on often.

##### *Plan Implementation Not Meeting Benchmarks*

Previous annual updates of the Ten Year Plan have offered information on which elements of the plan have been implemented. Parts of the plan that have already been implemented include:

- Development of an executive committee for the Homeless and Housing Alliance;
- Creation of Housing Placement Counselor positions; and
- Provision of an annual report on the progress being made on the Ten Year Plan.

However, many of the tasks within the plan have not been implemented yet, or the degree of their implementation has been difficult to measure. Other goals have only been partially fulfilled. For example, while opening the Lewis Center is perceived as a large success, it is only one of several centers that were supposed to open as a result of the Ten Year Plan.

### *Assessment Process*

Most coordinated assessment processes will have to go through several revisions before effectiveness is maximized. The current assessment process still has some room to improve. Some stakeholders expressed concern that:

- The current process does not make referrals to certain agencies for no explicit reason;
- The community has not yet created prioritization and targeting criteria that determine who is referred or admitted to different interventions;
- The Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) may not be successfully reaching, assessing, or engaging households experiencing chronic homelessness;
- Consumers find the Lewis Center itself difficult to navigate;
- Many households eligible for homelessness assistance services are being turned away for not being “housing ready;” and
- Data on referrals made from the Lewis Center is either unavailable or difficult to obtain.

## HOMELESSNESS ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

### **Strengths**

#### *Cooperation Among Stakeholders*

Cooperation is viewed as one of the system’s greatest strengths. Community leader respondents identified “cooperation and collaboration among programs” as the second biggest strength of the community behind the Ten Year Plan. Sixty-six percent of community leader survey respondents also said that all of the essential partners to ending homelessness are at the table and share the same vision for ending homelessness. Consumer respondents agreed with leaders’ assessments, with 54 percent saying that they agreed that the different agencies and organizations in the community worked well together.

#### *Consumer Satisfaction*

Providers receive mostly positive reviews from consumer respondents, with 67 percent being satisfied with the quality of services they received while homeless and 72 percent satisfied with the way they were treated by service providers while homeless. However, over half disagreed that they got to call the shots about when and how they received services.

I am satisfied with how I was treated by service providers in my community while being homeless.

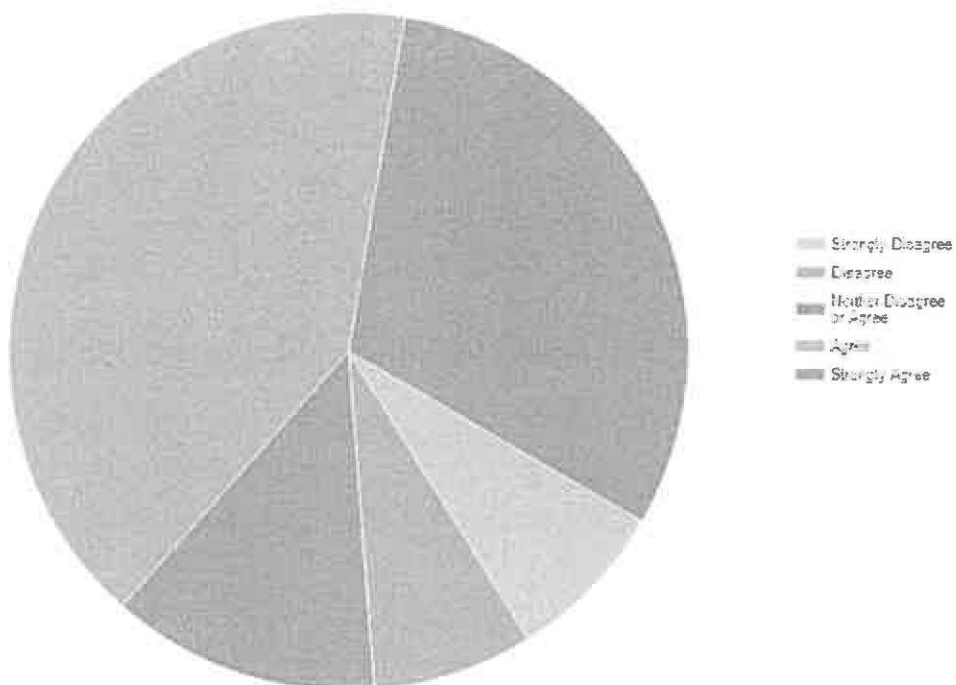


Figure 3: Most consumer respondents surveyed were satisfied with how they were treated by homelessness assistance providers.

## Weaknesses

### *Lack of Permanent Housing Resources*

Stakeholders identified several problem areas in Palm Beach County's homelessness assistance system. A lack of "back end" resources, including affordable permanent housing units, came up frequently. Fifty-five percent of community leaders felt that there were not sufficient rapid re-housing resources available in the community to get people into housing in 45 days or less. Additionally, there is evidence that maintaining landlord relationships are not a priority, as 53 percent of service provider respondents neither disagreed nor agreed that landlords housing their clients were actively supported through regular communication.

Please answer these additional questions about housing consumers:

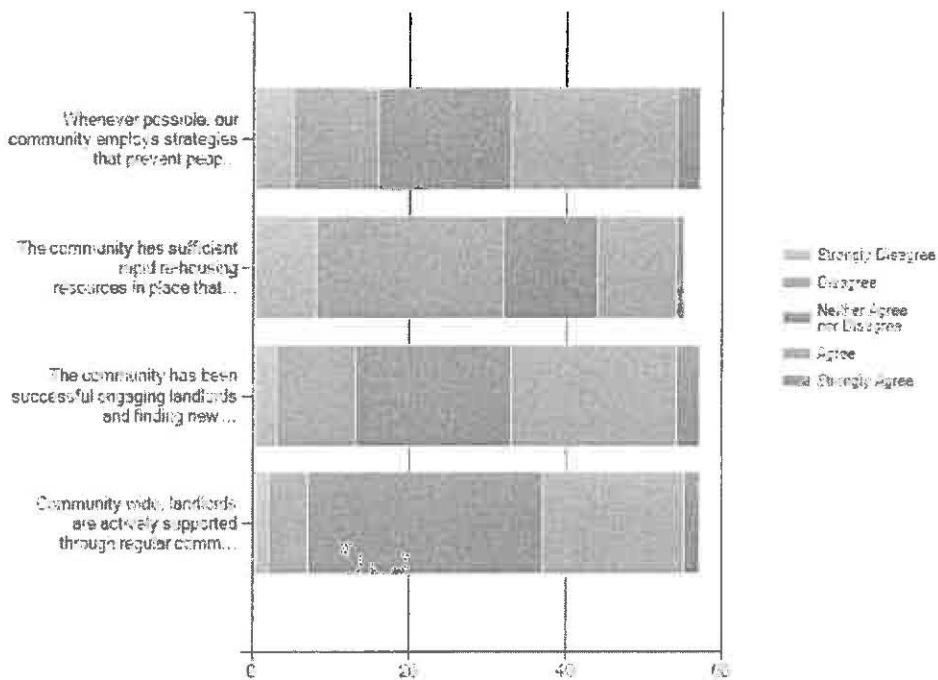


Figure 4: Service provider respondents also had doubts about rapid re-housing resource availability in the community.

#### Underserved Subpopulations

According to service providers, some subpopulations are being underserved. Fifty-six percent of service provider survey respondents said immigrants and refugees are not being adequately served, and 50 percent each said the elderly and unaccompanied youth were not being adequately served in the community.

Additionally, several stakeholders expressed concern during their phone interviews about people experiencing chronic homelessness. Many felt they were not accessing the services available at the Lewis Center and that outreach efforts were not sufficiently engaging these households.

#### Lack of Performance Focus

Performance is not perceived to be a focus for Palm Beach County at this time. Forty-two percent of community leaders neither disagreed nor agreed that programs with the best performance are rewarded and praised. As performance is a key part of the HEARTH Act, this area should be addressed immediately.



## EXTERNAL BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

There are external challenges to Ten Year Plan implementation and homelessness assistance system improvement that must be worked around or mitigated. Many of these external barriers to success involve a lack of financial resources, including:

- The current economic and financial environment, particularly as it affects local and state budgets;
- Lack of a dedicated funding stream for homelessness assistance programs and services;
- Lack of financial commitments from municipalities; and
- Lack of investment from local private donors.

Other non-financial resources that are barriers to implementation of the plan and improvement of the system include:

- Lack of buy in from most local housing authorities;
- Lack of mental health treatment and services;
- Lack of affordable housing and priority status for households experiencing homelessness for housing vouchers; and
- A perceived lack of available wraparound services.

## PRIORITIES MOVING FORWARD

The Alliance recommends that the County prioritize the following strategies to improve Ten Year Plan implementation and homelessness assistance system effectiveness moving forward.

**1. Inventory and identify new funding sources for homelessness assistance and especially for rental subsidies:** The lack of homelessness assistance funding was identified by nearly every stakeholder interviewed as a major barrier to implementing the plan. However, there are ways the County can increase its funding resources:

- **Identify mainstream resources:** The County should work with local, state, and federal government agencies to identify if resources available through Veterans Affairs (VA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), HOME, or Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) programs could be redirected or targeted toward providing subsidies or services for households experiencing homelessness.
- **Advocate for increased resources:** Advocacy at the state and federal level can lead to increased funding for Palm Beach County. To connect with the Alliance's federal advocacy efforts, the County should contact Kate Seif at [cseif@naeh.org](mailto:cseif@naeh.org).
- **Identify financial resources specifically for rental assistance:** Rental assistance was the second most popular responses to "What do you need to get housing?" among consumer respondents (with 54 percent of consumer respondents saying they needed it). The County should do an inventory of state and local funds that can be used specifically to fund short- and medium-term subsidies. The County should also educate faith-based providers, private funders, foundations, and the business community about the need for rapid re-housing subsidies.
- **Build partnerships across systems:** People experiencing homelessness tend to interact with many other systems including corrections, foster care, and the health care system. Doing a data match that identifies the highest utilizers of these systems and targeting them with services can reduce costs to all systems and also increase investments from these systems in preventing and ending homelessness. The FUSE model is one way of doing this and is currently being explored in Broward County, FL.<sup>1</sup>

**2. Restructure governance responsibilities:** There are several entities in charge of homelessness system administration in Palm Beach County, including several that deal exclusively with the Ten Year Plan. A few stakeholders mentioned this was confusing and that governance included "too many layers." Members of the Homeless and Housing Executive Board were not entirely clear on what their responsibilities were.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the FUSE model, see: <http://www.csh.org/fuse>

Moving forward, the Continuum should:

- **Identify which body will be serving as the Continuum of Care (CoC) Board and primary governance entity:** The HHA Executive Board may be an appropriate choice, but this should be voted on and formally approved by the CoC. This board should take on as many governance responsibilities as is feasible (for example, the Board of County Commissioners may still have to have the final say on homelessness assistance decisions, but the Executive Board may be able to take on HAB responsibilities).
- **Blend Ten Year Plan and CoC responsibilities:** The entities involved in governance of the system and the Ten Year Plan now, including the County, the Homeless Coalition of Palm Beach County, HAB, HHA, and the HHA Executive Board should meet to discuss which tasks they are all working on that are relevant and should be signed over to the new primary governance entity.
- **Reduce the number of entities involved with governance.** Once tasks have been shifted over to the new primary governance entity, the other groups that previously worked on these tasks should be given different roles in the system, merged with other entities, or disbanded.

**3. Expand performance measurement efforts:** The Ten Year Plan does not contain explicit performance measures that align neatly with the HEARTH Act. Any updates to the plan should include the HEARTH Act performance measures as part of the system vision, especially:

- Reducing new entries into homelessness;
- Reducing lengths of homelessness episodes; and
- Reducing returns to homelessness.

Additionally, the County should be releasing quarterly reports on how well each program type (e.g., emergency shelter) and the system as a whole are meeting these outcomes. Good performance as measured by achievement of those outcomes should be one of the primary goals of the homelessness assistance system. Performance on outcomes should also shape decisions by the CoC board on which organizations receive funding.

**4. Increase capacity to place and support clients in permanent housing:** Increasing permanent housing resources will reduce “bottlenecking” at the front door, improve performance on HEARTH Act outcomes, and increase quality of life for consumers. The County must prioritize developing and increasing the resources that will help households exit into permanent housing, including Housing Placement Counselor staff, landlord engagement strategies, and tailored voluntary services.

*Housing Placement Counselor staff:* The creation of Housing Placement Counselor positions is called for in the Ten Year Plan specifically. Lewis Center staff expressed a need for more Housing Placement County staff, especially for unaccompanied individuals. Restructuring funding to hire additional housing placement staff may be necessary. If funding is tight, current Housing Placement Counselors could train case managers on landlord engagement and housing location strategies.

Realtors, or former realtors, are good resources to either use as Housing Placement Counselors or to train Housing Placement Counselors.

*Landlord engagement:* Landlord engagement is fundamental to the success of any rapid re-housing program. Good landlord engagement includes systemic efforts around:

- Engaging landlords through cold-calling, outreach to landlord associations, luncheons or other events, and development of personal relationships; and
- Maintaining landlord relationships through continued contact and support after clients have re-entered housing, creating incentives for landlord participation, and providing referrals for vacant units.

*Tailored voluntary services:* Several provider interviewees expressed concern about a lack of case management services to help consumers maintain housing. Two-thirds of consumer respondents stated they needed help finding a job to get housing; 49% stated a need for case management. Providers must ensure the services they are currently offering to consumers are both sufficient in quality and tailored to consumer needs, particularly their employment needs. The County should get more feedback from consumers about the case management services currently available to them and if more services are needed.

**5. Increase the permanent housing supply:** Increasing the amount of affordable permanent housing units in the community can be accomplished both through more successful engagement efforts with local housing authorities and through conversion of existing beds and resources into permanent housing. Engaging housing authorities has been an ongoing challenge for the County. Some strategies to improve the possibilities for people experiencing homelessness to obtain a voucher include:

- Speaking with local housing authorities about any laws that may make it difficult for them to provide preference to people experiencing homelessness and identifying changes to these laws that could be made or advocated for;
- Talking with other counties in Florida to identify housing authorities that are more engaged and how they achieved that level of engagement;
- Examining and copying program models where the CoC and housing authorities are well connected (e.g., Harrisonburg, VA); and
- Referencing Alliance and CSH materials on engaging housing authorities.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> CSH has developed a PHA toolkit, which can be found here: <http://www.csh.org/phatoolkit>

Another way to increase permanent housing capacity is to convert other existing housing resources into permanent housing. These resources include emergency shelter and transitional housing beds. Recently, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has made it easier for programs to reallocate based on performance or community need. The County should use information on best practices, the outcomes of programs, and the need for each program type in the community to determine which program types it would be advantageous to convert.

**6. Use coordinated assessment process to create system change:** The following strategies can help resolve some of the current coordinated assessment process issues as well as contribute to the development of a more effective homelessness assistance system:

- Develop system-wide targeting and prioritization criteria that identify which households should be served by each intervention and which households should be prioritized for receiving services. Use HUD guidelines as a jumping off point in developing these standards.
- Ensure assessment process is not insisting that potential consumers meet strict eligibility standards, thus “screening out” the most vulnerable. Criteria related to sobriety, employment status, and income may make it more difficult for the people with the most barriers to permanent housing to be re-housed. The community should examine all eligibility requirements and come together to reduce or eliminate them to ensure that everyone seeking services has a program that will serve them.
- Ensure that the assessment process is focused on ultimately providing a permanent housing solution for every household.
- Examine ways to increase outreach to the most vulnerable households that are living on the streets.
- Develop or update a policy guide that includes written protocols for conducting assessments, data entry and data sharing, and making referrals.

With a focus on these priorities and proper resource allocation, Palm Beach County can look forward to even more success over the next five years.