

Mercer Housing First Initiative (HFI), a Demonstration Project

Summary: A coalition of select state, local and city government agencies, United Way of Greater Mercer County (UWGMC), private funders, and nonprofit organizations, led by the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, has developed a three-year Housing First Initiative, which will evaluate the social and economic benefits of utilizing a Housing First approach for those experiencing long-term homelessness with disabilities. Under this project, the homeless will immediately be housed and provided the diversified supportive services they need to retain housing and cope with, address, and/or overcome the issues that caused their homelessness. It will leverage at least 10 funding sources to generate 50 rental vouchers and over \$600,000 in annual supportive service funding. UWGMC initial pledge of \$125,000 brought the other funding partners to the table. The results of the Initiative are intended to inform state policy making and increase resource allocation to supportive services and permanent housing solutions in Mercer County.

Target Population: The Initiative will house and provide supportive services to 35 individuals with disabilities who have experienced long-term homelessness, and 15 families who have a head of household who is disabled and has experienced long-term homelessness. Participants may be in recovery from chemical dependency and/or have physical and mental health issues contributing to past experiences of repeated or persistent homelessness. In the context of Mercer County's Continuum of Care (the local recipient of HUD homeless funding), the Initiative will result in an approximately 20% decrease in the chronically homeless population, and a 10% decrease in the number of families with children experiencing long-term homelessness.

Collaborative Partners: Collaborative partners funding and/or planning the Demonstration Initiative include: NJ Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency; NJ Department of Community Affairs; NJ Department of Human Services; Mercer County Board of Social Services; City of Trenton; Corporation for Supportive Housing; Monarch Housing; Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness; United Way of Greater Mercer County; the Partnership to End Long-Term Homelessness; and additional private funders. Together, the Collaborative is anticipated to commit over \$1.2 million annually to the project for three years. This Collaborative Committee will fund the Initiative and oversee its implementation and evaluation.

Initiative Model: The Initiative model utilizes scattered site rental units and a single integrated supportive service team comprised of interdisciplinary professionals. This team delivers wrap-around case management and behavioral and mental health care services to project clients and establishes linkages to community-based medical care; independent living skills training; employment services; financial literacy; benefits coordination; and housing search assistance. The project will be evaluated by an experienced outside evaluator funded by private dollars.

Timeframe: The RFP to select service providers for the Initiative was issued in February 2007. In April 2007 **Greater Trenton Behavioral HealthCare** was selected as the provider agency to implement the Initiative. The Collaborative will work with the selected agency in further program planning throughout 2007 for an official start date of January 2008. It will meet bi-weekly initially, and then at least quarterly or more frequently as necessary, to oversee the Initiative, ensuring effective implementation and evaluation. UWGMC has a seat on this collaborative body, which will provide regular progress reports to the Resource Investment Cabinet (RIC) through its regular monitoring process.