

# **NEW JERSEY ADVOCACY NETWORK TO END HOMELESSNESS**

## **State Policy of the NJ Advocacy Network to End Homelessness**

Homelessness represents a tremendous cost to New Jersey in lost productivity and in direct costs paid for shelter and emergency services. We currently manage homelessness, but we have not been focused on ending it. Ending homelessness can be accomplished, but it requires a systemic approach led by the State, which funds the lion share of the burden. Ending homelessness requires:

- 1) a mechanism for screening and assessing need
- 2) a robust program to prevent homelessness
- 3) permanent housing & various levels of supportive services tied to consumer need
- 4) housing stock affordable to those with very-low income.

This approach represents a major shift from a system of homeless services that puts people first into emergency shelters, then transitional housing and only after a long wait, if ever, into permanent homes.

This policy direction is based on successful national models that target prevention resources to those who need them most, combine permanent housing with supportive services and move people rapidly from shelter into homes. Our strategy to end homelessness needs to be based on implementing these best practices in New Jersey. They are not only more humane; they are also more cost effective than our current practice of managing homelessness.

### **Best-practice Models**

#### **Uniform Screening & Assessment**

A system to end homelessness must begin with a uniform means of determining people's needs. Screening and assessment will yield information that allows services to be planned for those with low, moderate and high barriers. This allows the system to produce appropriate and cost-effective interventions.

#### **Prevention & Diversion**

Preventing people from becoming homeless and diverting them from the shelter door are essential building blocks in a system for ending homelessness.

Prevention resources need to be organized and targeted to those most likely to become homeless. Diversion resources pay for people to remain where they are currently housed and rapidly relocated if need be, thus avoiding a costly episode of homelessness.

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## **Permanent Housing with supportive services Housing First (for chronically homeless)**

Housing First provides funding for permanent housing, case management and access to voluntary services that the long-term homeless population often need to maintain housing stability (mental health, drug treatment, vocational). Currently this population overuses and cycles back and forth through our shelters, emergency rooms and jails at a huge toll in human suffering and system costs.

## **Rapid Rehousing (for those with moderate barriers)**

Rapid Rehousing quickly moves families from shelters to permanent housing with case management and wrap-around services to assist them with maintaining housing stability and movement to self-sufficiency. Our current system has families entering New Jersey's shelter system when they are homeless, as there is no funding for rental assistance and case management services in the community.

## **Affordability**

New Jersey has been among the national leaders in mandating affordable housing development in all our communities. New Jersey has taken the important step of requiring that housing be created for the very low-income population that is most vulnerable to homelessness. Targeting housing resources to those individuals and families with the lowest incomes is a cost-effective and essential strategy to ending homelessness.

To facilitate the switch to an "ending homelessness" strategy, we make the following policy recommendations:

### ***1. Establish a uniform screening and assessment tool for those who are homeless and at-risk of becoming homeless.***

An "ending homelessness" system needs to start with the concept of screening and assessing for need and providing interventions appropriate to the assessed level of need.

We recommend the development and implementation of a state-wide system.

### ***2. Align State's prevention resources with goal of ending homelessness.***

National thinking on preventing homelessness focuses on those who are most likely to become homeless. This includes programs to establish protective payee status, to provide intensive case management and direct financial assistance and to divert those about to become homeless.

We recommend that the State align its policies with these national best-practice models.

### ***3. Create a front-door to the homeless system that includes assessment and rapid movement to permanent housing.***

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Since circumstances will inevitably arise in people's lives that cause them to lose their homes, a responsive safety net must be available.

We recommend that the State create an accountable front-door to the homeless system that includes short-term shelter, coupled with assessment and rapid movement to permanent housing.

### ***4. Prioritize housing vouchers for the chronically homeless individuals and families -- those with the highest assessed needs.***

Housing vouchers are essential to end homelessness. Those who have been chronically homeless cost the system the most money in emergency medical, jail, court, shelter, transitional housing and other related costs. Ending chronic homelessness will free up resources for other needy families and individuals.

We recommend that the State homelessness policy prioritize housing vouchers for the chronically homeless, including:

- Federal housing vouchers, allocated through the State Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and various local housing authorities
- State Rental Assistance Program vouchers (SRAPs) distributed by DCA;
- housing programs targeted to the needs of the mentally ill through the State's Division of Mental Health Services.

### ***5. Restructure the State's Emergency Assistance program as funding mechanism for services.***

A reliable source of service funding is needed to implement the best practice models of Housing First and Rapid Rehousing. The majority of funding for homeless services currently comes through the State's Emergency Assistance program, which funds emergency shelters and transitional housing for people receiving welfare (General Assistance and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families)

We recommend that the State reorganize Emergency Assistance to fund rental assistance and community-base case management as an alternative to funding shelters and transitional housing. This is a cost-effective approach that also facilitates ending homelessness.

### ***6. Develop a best-practice model to address the needs of those assessed with low and moderate barriers.***

Ending homelessness for those with low-to-moderate barriers requires a new strategy that has not yet coalesced as a national best-practice model. The largest number of people who are homeless in New Jersey fall into this category. Moving these people quickly out of homelessness will require creative use of mainstream services, with a focus on short-term housing subsidy and employment.

We recommend that New Jersey take the lead in developing and funding a best-practice model for this population.

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### ***7. Target affordable housing resources to those with the lowest incomes and the greatest need.***

Affordable housing for the lowest income population is an essential strategy for ending homelessness. We recommend the adoption of a State Housing plan that will:

- effectively utilize capital and rental resources from the National Housing Trust Fund.
- recapitalize the State's Special Needs Housing Trust Fund.
- and create a policy for targeting permanent housing resources to those with the lowest income.