

[hohm-lis]...
in Lake County

**The Lake County plan to end
Homelessness in ten years**

COORDINATED AND Submitted on behalf of a consortium of
Lake County agencies and organizations by:

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According to the American Heritage Dictionary, homeless is defined as:

1. without a home (adj.)
2. persons who lack permanent housing (noun)

I. SUMMARY

A. VISION STATEMENT

Lake County's vision is to end homelessness within ten years by assisting individuals and families in obtaining permanent, affordable housing; by providing on-going case management support services; and by identifying and developing systems that prevent homelessness.

B. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Lake County has been rated as one of the most impoverished counties in the State of Michigan for years. Between lack of employment opportunities, limited human service providers and deficient housing stock, Lake County has not been able to overcome significant barriers that constantly put its low-income residents in jeopardy.

Lake County is located in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. According to the 2005 U.S. Census Quickfacts, Lake County has an estimated population of 12,069 residents, and encompasses 567 square miles. While Lake County is a haven for hunters and fisherman due to its lush forests and numerous lakes and streams, it continues to falter in Michigan's current economic crisis.

Many residents are leaving for employment out of Lake County, due to lack of employment within Lake itself. Most of the current employment opportunities are service related (gas stations, food service, etc.) that do not pay a "living wage". While higher wage employment may be available through the public school system and the county government system, these opportunities are extremely limited with low turnover for existing positions. There are no functioning industries or manufacturing plants that could employ the residents in Lake County; instead, many low-income residents continue to survive on public assistance and other forms of charitable donations.

Additionally, Lake County lacks the availability of “safe and affordable” housing units. Many housing units are inadequate, unsafe and should not be passing Housing Quality Standards for Lake’s low-income residents. Many low-income housing units that are available are subject to high rents, suffer from lack of plumbing/electricity/running water, and have visible signs of deterioration within the structure itself. Plus, many existing rental units could be condemned at any point, leaving the residents immediately homeless, yet without an emergency homeless shelter to provide them urgent housing.

Once Lake’s families and individuals lose their housing either due to eviction, lack of rent payment or from not finding another available low-income unit, the families/individuals become another one of Michigan’s homeless statistics. No homeless shelters are available in Lake County, and many of the “new” homeless do not have transportation to a shelter in another county. Plus, many families and individuals are always at the edge of homelessness (i.e. always close to being evicted due to lack of funds to pay rent).

While housing in Lake County may be substandard, the residents have no choice and must utilize it, since there is no other available housing around. Even if the housing has many deficiencies (i.e. plumbing, electricity), the low-income residents continue to reside there, due to the availability for low-income or subsidized housing.

Homelessness in Lake County has been a hidden yet ignored issue that continues to escalate due to the county’s economic conditions. Many of the homeless are individuals who are “doubled or tripled up” with friends or family, or teens and young adults “couch surfing”

from one house to another. Due to Lake County's vast geographic region, many homeless live in the isolated woods or forests – either in dilapidated trailers, tents or cars. These “hidden homeless” are often ignored and go untreated for mental and physical health issues, since it can be costly in staff time and resources to seek out and/or deliver resources to this homeless clientele in their rural setting. Additionally, trying to get an exact count of Lake County's homeless is futile, since the nature of the hidden homeless is to remain “invisible”.

Reasons that contribute to Lake County's homelessness include multi-generational poverty, limited education, lack of work/skill training, transportation, mental illness, criminal behavior and incarceration, unemployment, health problems/lack of health care, domestic violence, divorce, alcohol and addiction, home foreclosures and eviction, housing costs and lack of housing support systems.

Lake is also extremely limited as to available funding for homelessness, since the existing resources that are currently available are limited in size, scope and purpose. The existing MSHDA Emergency Services Grant (ESG) for 2006/07 provides shelter assistance only for youth (Staircase Youth Services) and domestic violence (COVE), leaving out direct assistance for homeless families or individuals. Plus, by the lack of a Continuum of Care currently in place in Lake County, no funding opportunities are imminent for agencies and organizations to be the recipient of.

Lake County does not have a shelter or any type of scattered site transitional housing for homeless families and individuals to use for an emergency or to transition in to. When many

agencies or organizations make referrals for Lake's homeless population, they must send them on to neighboring counties who provide these much-needed resources. Sadly, the contact and personal relationship that is initiated by the Lake County case worker is severed, as well as the trust that comes along with building the important relationship with the homeless clientele in the beginning. By not offering any emergency housing opportunities for its homeless, Lake County continues to fall behind in the philosophy of "Housing First".

II. IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

In October 2005, the 480-bed Michigan Youth Correctional Facility closed in Baldwin, eliminating approximately 220 corrections officers (Ludington Daily News, August 31, 2006). The Michigan Youth Correctional Facility was built in 1999 under former Gov. John Engler, who promised good-paying employment opportunities to residents in the poverty-stricken Lake County region. While a bill has passed to re-open the prison facility to help the local economy, it still does not take away the impact of when the prison closed last year, forcing the already economic-impacted residents into a financial downward spiral.

Poverty continues to be a serious and increasing problem in Michigan. With Michigan's high unemployment rate and its continuing job loss over the past several years, many individuals have turned to governmental assistance in order to provide for themselves or their families. Of those Lake County residents lucky enough to be employed, many are making

minimum wage, thus barely able to make ends meet, much less provide for a family. Many families in poverty have little or no discretionary income, and they are forced to forego or compromise certain necessities over time as their purchasing power decreases. These choices can lead to risks in health and nutrition, increased stress in family relationships and neglecting long-term financial needs in order to meet the current, immediate needs.

The loss of youth is also critical to the ability for Lake County to continue to survive. Since there are not enough job opportunities for youth to find stable employment, the youth tend to commute to other counties, taking their skills, talents and paychecks with them. Many end up finding housing in the other counties, and never return back to Lake County, due to its lack of employment and housing opportunities.

Also, parolees exiting the prison system need to be housed, yet due to lack of safe and affordable housing, many are leaving for other counties, who end up footing the bill for the parolees. Many exiting prisoners lack job skills, transportation, suitable day care services/assistance, and employment.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2005, the following statistics place Lake County residents extremely at risk, especially when compared to the average Michigan statistics:

	Lake County:	Michigan:
Persons below poverty, 2003	16.9%	11%

Children in poverty, ages 0-17	27.6%	14.2%
Students receiving free/reduced Priced school lunches	84.3%	36.0%
Median household income, 2003	\$27,452	\$46,291
Per capita money income, 1999	\$14,457	\$22,168
High school graduates, 2000	72.2%	83.4%
Bachelor's degree or higher, 2000	7.8%	21.8%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2000	\$61,300	\$115,600
Percentage of Michigan General Population Receiving Public Assistance Payments, 10/2005	19%	10.8%

Additionally, for the above statistics of Children in Poverty, Students Receiving Free/Reduced Priced School Lunches and Percentage of Michigan General Population Receiving Public Assistance Payments, Lake County ranks the *worst* in the state amongst all other counties.

While Michigan's median household income has fallen by 12% in the last six years (a rate not seen in any other state), it coincides with other poor marks of health in the economy: high levels of unemployment, job loss, home foreclosures and outward migration, to just name a

few (GR Press, Sept. 3, 2006). These are all burdens that describe Lake County and its struggling low-income residents.

III. RESPONSE OF LAKE COUNTY

In July 2006, seven individuals representing six government and private agencies convened with the purpose of forming an Advisory Board in order to write a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness on behalf of Lake County. This was the initial step of identifying the programs and services that Lake County needs to provide its low-income individuals and families, as well as addressing the barriers and obstacles that continue to plague this poverty-stricken rural county. Through this process, a Ten Year Plan was beginning to form as to how to address homelessness in a rural county: Who is specifically our homeless clientele? What are the barriers/obstacles to permanent/supportive housing? What programs/services are available to homeless individuals and families? When and where is case management brought in? What agencies/organizations need to be involved at the planning level? What are realistic housing opportunities for homeless clients? Will the stakeholders, organizations and agencies of Lake County rally around a plan to address its homeless clientele?

As the Advisory Board continued to meet and research these questions, many of preliminary answers started to evolve in to the formation of the Ten Year Plan. Additionally, the Advisory Board acknowledged that Lake County's Plan needs to be fluid in order to adapt

to its changing economic and political climate. Currently, with the lack of data to generate a solid baseline, the Plan, along with the Point in Time in January 2007, will create a starting point in Lake County in order to track homelessness in the future.

In October 2006, committed individuals and agencies/organizations will reconvene the now-defunct Continuum of Care in Lake County, in order to provide the much-needed programs and services to its low-income residents. By having a structure and planning process in place, Lake County residents should be able to look for some relief with their deplorable housing situation.

III. INVENTORY OF CURRENT SERVICES

Currently in Lake County, there are six organizations that provide services, shelter/housing, and/or case management services with youth, individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Department of Human Services:	Financial assistance programs; Medicaid; emergency assistance; Child and Adult Protective Services; discharge planning for youth exiting foster care; shelter/rent assistance; State Emergency Relief; Children's
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	Foster Care; Juvenile Justice; Foster Home Licensing
Staircase Youth Services:	Outreach/24 hour crisis intervention; assessment and referrals; host home placements; counseling; life skills training; case management; closed case assistance; specific assistance (monies for clothes, school, etc.)
COVE	Domestic violence shelter; counseling; planning for permanent housing
West Michigan Community Mental Health	Treatment of persons with mental illness and developmental disabilities; in home supports and skill training; rental assistance; vocational skills training; limited transitional housing; discharge planning from institutional care; emergency needs fund; loan repayment program
FiveCAP	Weatherization; shelter/utility assistance; Head Start; commodities

Department of Corrections	Financial assistance for transitional living; prisoner re-entry program; substance abuse counseling; job skills training; educational programming; transportation assistance; supervision and case management of adult felony offenders that reside in the community
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From examining the existing programs and services in place, it reveals numerous gaps and inefficiencies in the area's current service system for addressing homelessness. Extremely limited funding has made homeless services virtually extinct. Additionally, with each agency providing service to clientele without a community-wide housing structure in place (Continuum of Care), it leads to a break-down in communication regarding what client needs and housing availability are. There is also little centralized case planning for intake, permanent planning, and service delivery, nor venue to share with other front-line staff. By not providing an emergency homeless shelter or transitional housing in Lake County, it restricts the case manager's ability to provide any form of immediate, emergency housing for homeless clientele.

IV. PRINCIPLES AND CORE VALUES

The vision for Lake County's Ten Year Plan is to end homelessness within ten years by assisting individuals and families in obtaining permanent, affordable housing; by providing on-going case management support services; and by identifying and developing systems that prevent homelessness.

The Lake County Advisory Board has established a set of eight (8) fundamental principles and core values that will guide implementation of their vision over the next ten years:

- a. The realities of *rural* homelessness present unique challenges and opportunities in providing safe and affordable housing to all people of Lake County.
- b. The tragedy of homelessness in Lake County can be eliminated in ten years through a concentrated plan orchestrated by a committed group of community stakeholders and organizations.
- c. Only when a person's need for safe and secure housing is addressed can they effectively utilize other supportive resources to pursue higher levels of personal and family security and well-being.
- d. An outcome-based planning and implementation process that employs a "*Housing First*" approach is the most viable strategy of ending the institution of homelessness.

- e. A cooperative and interlaced partnership among a coalition of public and private organizations, other community stakeholders, and the ideas of people who are homeless will be mobilized to plan and provide a continuum of care and an array of services to address the complex factors that contribute to rural homelessness.
- f. An effective plan to end homelessness must be targeted to specific disadvantaged and marginalized groups of individuals and families who are, or who have a strong likelihood of becoming homeless, including difficult-to reach and serve groups such as victims of domestic violence, homeless and “throw-away” youth, mentally ill and disabled adults, and incarcerated and/or institutionalized populations who are re-entering their communities.
- g. Multiple strategies will be designed and delivered to homeless people in highly accessible ways and through locations that insure a continuum of emergency and temporary shelter resources, permanent supportive housing, financial resources, and a wide range of support services.
- h. The planning process and on-going roles of the partners affirm the responsibility of the local planning body to advocate on behalf of the homeless, change institutional policies

and practices that sustain homelessness, and develop legislative and educational initiatives to inform professionals and the public.

V. THE PHASES

A. PHASE 1:

PHASE 1 will be centered on capacity building within Lake County's community itself. It will involve governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based partners, local businesses and schools, and community members. By building upon the existing resources that Lake County has, they will not only build capacity, but continue to strengthen and enrich the capacity of the community over the years.

PHASE 1 will provide leadership from an existing nonprofit (Newaygo County Community Services) that has a proven track record in housing programs and services. NCCS will provide ongoing direction and support for Lake County in order for Lake to become sustainable in the future. By bringing key stakeholders in the community around the table and sharing a combined vision, the goal to end homelessness in ten years will become a reality.

Additionally, case managers and line staff need to be brought together on a consistent basis in order to communicate housing goals throughout their agencies. By having the workers who have a working relationship with the homeless, administrators

will have a better concept of what can be done in order to provide better service and programs to their clientele.

Goals for PHASE 1 include:

- Convening a coalition of agencies through the newly implemented Continuum of Care to identify the housing needs and to address homelessness
- Collaborating with State agencies (i.e. MSHDA) for technical support, direction and financial resources to insure Lake County's Plan participates with the best-practice and evidence-based strategies being implemented nation-wide
- Providing opportunities for members of the Lake County Continuum of Care to attend training, workshops and conferences in order to strengthen planning and service delivery structures
- Bringing in technical assistance or guest speaker opportunities to educate agencies/organizations about the "Housing First" program

B. PHASE 2:

PHASE 2 will be structured around developing stability for housing services and programs. By using a mentoring model, other NPOs will provide hands-on leadership that will continue to build sustainability in to the future.

Also, existing housing agencies will be brought around the table in order to share common goals and visions for the existing housing programs. By increasing

communication amongst the providers themselves, it will result in improved client service across the board, as well as hope to provide more housing opportunities.

Goals for PHASE 2 include:

- Implementing the “Housing First” philosophy within all Continuum of Care agencies and organizations who provide housing assistance
- Developing partnerships with local landlords for increased housing opportunities
- Developing services and processes to help resolve landlord–tenant disputes through mediation and problem–solving strategies
- Assisting clients to avoid eviction or foreclosure with funds for rent, utility and fuel arrearages
- Developing strategies to hold landlords accountable for repair and sub–standard housing units
- Providing mentoring opportunities for homeless families and individuals in order to learn basic life skills and budgeting
- Ensuring that all low–income clientele are informed and are able to access public assistance resources for income and financial aid to address factors contributing to homelessness
- Developing and keeping up–to–date a housing resource listing that includes specific rental and housing opportunities, landlords and contact information

C. PHASE 3

PHASE 3 continues to build capacity and sustainability for the long term. Much of the sustainability will be focused around the ability to seek new funding resources for housing opportunities for low-income clientele. Through the new Continuum of Care, new grant initiatives can be sought after as a coalition in order to provide increased and stable housing assistance in future years.

Goals for PHASE 3 include:

- Accessing new State and Federal funding initiatives for increased units of scattered site, permanent housing
- Accessing new State funding initiatives for scattered site emergency homeless shelter (maximum 90 days per client)
- Accessing additional Housing Choice Vouchers for eligible Lake County residents
- Tracking homeless clientele in order to develop a baseline set of data (i.e. HMIS)
- Establishing a network of drop-in sites within the community where homeless individuals can meet basic needs for a shower, laundry, and bathroom facilities

We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.

Mother Teresa