

# GRATIOT COUNTY 10 YEAR PLAN

## AUGUST 31, 2006

### SUMMARY SECTION

In June of 2006, the Chair of the Gratiot County Collaborative Council, Director of the Department of Human Service's representative, Director of Community Mental Health, and the Chair of the Continuum of Care signed a MOU to work together to develop a plan to end homelessness in Gratiot County in ten years. Shortly after that a meeting was held with those signing the MOU and several members of the Collaborative Council to make some initial decisions. Decisions were made to involve as many Gratiot County persons as possible in the development of the plan, and to hire someone to facilitate future meetings and assist with drafting the plan.

Further meetings involving representatives from several Gratiot County health and human service agencies, law enforcement, public schools, Juvenile Court, MSHDA, Michigan Department of Corrections, and some faith based agencies, resulted in the drafting of this document, which represents how we would like to proceed with our plan.

Those attending the visioning meeting were asked to rate their level of commitment to the plan, using a scale with one being a low commitment and 10 being highly committed. The Council on Aging rated their level at 4; MDOC at 5; Salvation Army at 8; DHS, Eight Cap, and Mid-Michigan District Health Dept. at 9; and Women's Aid Service, Inc. at 10. Others did not reveal their commitment.

a. Prior to creating a plan to end homelessness, it was decided that we needed to define homelessness for Gratiot County. The definition developed is:

Homelessness in Gratiot County consists of individuals living in the community without the resources to obtain and sustain a permanent, primary residence.

Not all Gratiot County agencies have tracked the number of homeless persons they deal with, so we are not able to report on the exact scope of the problem. However, those agencies who do track report the following numbers: Women's Aid Service, Inc. housed 42 Gratiot County homeless persons this year; Salvation Army 165; Eight-Cap 618 persons (mostly homeless prevention services) and CMH served approximately 5 persons, specific to homeless issues. The Department of Human Services, in Gratiot County reported that this past year 9 youth have aged out of foster care, meaning that they had to find permanent living arrangements. Those are significant numbers considering that we did not have a count from law enforcement, who regularly place homeless persons in a local boarding house, or from local schools who regularly work with youth living in the homes of friends, or numbers from DHS regarding the number of persons they assisted due to homelessness.

What we do know, is that we have a problem and that most of our homeless persons are not visible to local governmental officials, thus many local officials do not acknowledge that there is a problem. With this plan we hope to provide concrete data that will engage them in helping solve this problem.

**b.** Gratiot County members decided on the following vision to guide our planning process:

“All Gratiot County families and individuals will have easy access to safe, affordable housing.”

This plan will address issues of resources, both people and capital, coordination of resources and services for homeless prevention, emergency, transitional, and permanent housing as well as garnering governmental and community support for people who seek the stability of a home environment.

We believe that healthy communities are made up of healthy community members, and that part of what constitutes healthy members are persons whose housing needs are met. As noted in the General section of this plan, the community costs of homelessness are high.

When we continue to place the people (often the same people) in temporary housing, over and over again, we are not solving the problem for the homeless or for the community. If our plan is to use a housing first model in all service agencies providing homeless services, we will reach housing permanency for residents.

**c.** Gratiot County’s current response to homelessness is based on each individual agency, faith based group, etc. providing their particular services to those with whom they come into contact. However, there is a system for collaboration on the use of financial resources in place known as the Gratiot Resource Energy Assistance Team (GREAT). This system created a single point of entry for persons seeking financial assistance for issues related to homelessness and utility needs. This process has allowed the community to stretch their helping dollars, and to make it easier for consumers to access services.

Currently in Gratiot County, most homelessness services for the general population are handled by Eight-Cap, Salvation Army, and Gratiot Emergency Housing, while persons who become homeless through domestic violence are assisted by Women’s Aid Service, Inc. Motel vouchers are used for emergency shelter situations. Women’s Aid Service, Inc. has a shelter for victims of domestic violence and their minor children. Families and individuals can stay in the shelter for up to 30 days or sometimes longer.

When an individual or family enters the DV shelter, a needs assessment is completed, which includes housing needs. The goal is always for permanent housing if the victim intends to stay in the service area; if not transportation to a safe area is sought.

Some faith based organizations also provide resources and assistance. All homeless service providers have limited funds each year to help persons with first months rent, to prevent eviction, and to prevent utility shut offs. These are all short term solutions.

The resources for assisting the homeless in Gratiot County are more able to meet short term than long term needs. So, many persons are helped several times. There are not enough programs that provide long term assistance, either financially or with casework services, to prevent homelessness through housing sustainability. We are hopeful that by using a Housing First model in Gratiot County, we will address long term needs.

There are many factors that contribute to homelessness in Gratiot County. They are outlined below in the General Section, a. ii.

## **GENERAL SECTION**

a. As noted in the Summary Section, a., there are no real accurate statistics for identifying the scope of homelessness in Gratiot County. However, based on the information that we do have, and our knowledge of the under-representation from law enforcement, DHS, and educators, we recognize that we have a significant homelessness problem in Gratiot County.

i. The following national statistics indicate the extent and costs of homeless nationwide. Although, Gratiot County's homeless population is not often visible, the numbers probably are in line with these statistics. According to a study by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, Urban Institute, and the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers, between 2.3 and 3.5 million people, 39% of them children, experience homelessness each year. According to a report by the National Coalition for Homeless, June 06, 3.5 million is probably a more accurate estimate, because not all homeless persons utilize service providers.

Information on the National Alliance to End Homelessness' web page, reports that the costs for permanently housing the homeless population are less than the current costs created by homelessness. Examples included: the annual costs for an Emergency shelter bed funded by HUD's Emergency Shelter Grants program is \$8,706 more than the average of a federally funded housing subsidy (Section 8 housing certificate); homeless people do not have access to consistent health care, and are more likely than non-homeless persons, to access costly health

care services; and homeless persons spend a lot of time in jail for loitering, costing taxpayers approximately \$14,480 per person per year.

Not all costs noted in the report were monetary, although they may lead to financial problems. The report noted that because homeless children have very poor educational experiences, their future productivity and career prospects may suffer. This report reveals that homeless persons are often unable to provide productive input to communities; this costs communities, including the Gratiot County community.

ii. Contributing factors to homelessness in Gratiot County include:

- Life skills
- Lack of affordable housing
- Policy issues including non-involvement of key stakeholders
- Situational factors including lack of support system, & domestic violence
- Health issues
- Economy
- Transportation

iii. A closer look how these factors impact persons who become homeless follows:

### **Life Skills**

It was noted that resources are provided to some families many times over the years, and that their problems seem to be the same each year. One reason for this may be that we have been able to provide only short term solutions. Other reasons include: some people do not have the skills necessary to obtain and sustain employment, budget and manage their finances, or to manage a household. Some persons are not aware of the resources in the community or if they are aware of them, are afraid or embarrassed to obtain assistance.

### **Lack of Affordable Housing**

Gratiot County lacks affordable housing for low income families. There are a few subsidized housing units but not enough to meet current needs. There are some available section 8 housing vouchers, but there are waiting lists for these.

Often homeless persons are assisted in getting into housing, but are not able to sustain the housing due to job loss, low income jobs, etc. Following evictions, they may end up on “black lists,” making locating housing even more difficult..

### **Policy Issues Including Non-Involvement of Key Stakeholders**

Gratiot County leaders do not recognize that there is a homelessness problem in the county, thus making it difficult to involve them in a solution. Many of the homeless persons are living doubled up with friends or relatives or are young people living from friend to friend. Efforts to get local developers to increase the number of available affordable units in the county have also failed.

### **Situational Factors Including lack of a support system & domestic violence**

Many persons become homeless due to changes in their circumstances or a crisis situation which can include fires and natural disasters. Changes in circumstances can include a young person being kicked out of the family home, divorce, a death in the family, aging out of foster care, being released from incarceration or a health care facility. Persons who lack a support system have no family or friends to turn to in times of crisis and may lose their homes. Persons who seek safety due to domestic violence in the home often have to start a new household and many do not have jobs or job skills.

### **Health Issues**

Homelessness can be the result of poor mental or physical health, a change in mental or physical health, unmanaged mental or physical health, and substance abuse issues.

### **Lack of Homelessness Service Coordination**

Gratiot County service providers are able to provide solutions to short term homelessness, but lack the ability to provide long term solutions. This is partly an issue of lack of long-term planning by service providers where needs are anticipated based on the actual knowledge about the scope of homelessness in the community.

### **Economy**

Gratiot County has had several major job losses over the last few years; and many available jobs are very low paying. Job loss and low paying jobs can lead to homelessness. The Greater Gratiot Development Corporation exists; but needs to bring more well-paying jobs into the community with the understanding that this is a long-term solution that will not necessarily see short term answers.

### **Transportation**

Gratiot County lacks a good public transportation system, with some towns and out-lying areas having no public transportation at all. Many problems, such as not being able to get to a job due to distance and no personal or public transportation as well as frequent tardiness due to an un-reliable vehicle, are commonly experienced by homeless and low income persons.

**b.** Up until about six months ago, Gratiot County had a boarding house that was used for emergency sheltering of single homeless individuals. The boarding house included meals plus shelter. The Salvation Army was contacted by law enforcement and other human service agencies, or had contact with the homeless individual themselves, and then contacted the boarding house, agreed on a length of stay (usually 3-5 days) and were billed by the boarding house owner. However, the boarding house has been closed.

Historically homeless families have been housed in motels for 3-5 nights with casework services during that time. Families experiencing domestic violence have been housed through Women's Aid Domestic Service, Inc. for almost 28 years. Up until approximately 2 years ago, Women's Aid Service, Inc. ran a domestic violence shelter in Gratiot County. However, due to policy changes and under-utilization it was necessary to close that shelter to overnight services. The same services are provided, with increased transportation services, at the shelter in Mt. Pleasant.

Eight-Cap, Salvation Army, local faith based organizations have historically provided resources to assist persons in remaining in their current homes. These services have included help with utility shut off payments, weatherization, and payments to prevent evictions.

Gratiot Emergency Housing, a total volunteer organization, has been serving the housing needs of the community for the past 35 years. Two of the volunteers have served the organization since its inception and 3 of the volunteers have over 10 years of service to the organization. Gratiot Emergency Housing serves between 100 and 120 families each year with minimal assistance of housing needs and between 120 and 200 families with counseling towards their homeless situations.

Historically, Gratiot County leaders have not believed that there is a homeless problem in Gratiot County. As noted previously, this is partly due to the type of homelessness in the county.

i. Needed changes for Gratiot County include stronger, more concrete data regarding the extent and nature of homelessness, increased resources to impact the factors contributing to homelessness, enhancement of current services, including casework services, along with more long term solutions to the problem of county residents who are chronically "episodically homeless."

c. As stated in the Summary Section, "We believe that healthy communities are made up of healthy community members, and that part of what constitutes healthy members are persons whose housing needs are met; thus, our vision for ending Gratiot County homelessness is to make efficient use of casework and financial resources, to help ensure easy access to safe, affordable housing for families and individuals in our community. This includes the coordination of those resources and services for homeless prevention, emergency, transitional, and permanent housing as well as garnering governmental and community support for people who seek the stability of a home environment."

i. The benefit to housing stability is communicated in the Summary Section and the General Section; a.

ii. The vision and value statements following the vision, demonstrate cost-effectiveness by stating that healthy communities have healthy members whose housing needs are met; by including information regarding efficient use of resources and coordination of services.

#### **d. Strategic Response**

i. *Implementation* of the 10 year Plan to End Homelessness is our goal, not just writing a plan. Therefore, while it is difficult and time-consuming to take into consideration numerous aspects of the community with their different perspectives, that is exactly what we did.

ii. As stated in the summary, with the help of a facilitator to keep us on task, members of human service agencies, education, law enforcement/courts, education, faith-based organizations, local government, homeless, those previously homeless, and those on the edge of homelessness as well as the community at large were invited to participate in the process of developing our plan.

iii. While not all people invited could participate in meetings, most often due to being short staffed or unable to fund current staff to attend, we have included all these stakeholders by copying them on the agendas of meetings, seeking their input by e-mail, phone, or proxy in advance of meetings if unable to attend, e-mailing the results of meetings and again seeking their response to those minutes and outcomes, and seeking individual input where people and organizations have data to support the need to address homelessness or resources to assist us.

iv. Focus groups with our customers, the homeless, previously homeless, or near-homeless and/or advocates of these individuals were held prior to convening the committee at large. It is interesting to note that while the notes from those focus groups were not shown to that committee until AFTER they had shared their perspectives on the problems associated with and root causes of homelessness, there was a lot of agreement between the customers and the providers of services. What would be notable, however, is the short-term focus of the homeless while the committee utilized short-term issues to illustrate the bigger picture issues with subsequent long-term recommended fixes.

When looking at committee notes, we find that many of the issues we're dealing with are not in direct control at the local level. Instead, much groundwork needs to be laid in the community in order to influence others, engage them in the problems and costs associated with homelessness in our community, and gain their empathy as well as their financial and political support towards the goals recommended.

iv. As noted in the General Section, we determined a list of issues contributing to homelessness. From that list we decided our goals would address the following issues:

**Lack of Life Skills** needed to sustain permanent housing including:

- Lack of priorities
- Lack of money management skills
- Lack of awareness of resources

**Policy Issues** including:

- Lack of concrete data
- "uninformed -- educated" government leaders on the issue

**Lack of Affordable Housing** including:

- Lack of adequate and/or affordable housing
- Insufficient/fragmented emergency sheltering system
- Insufficient short and long term supportive housing for persons with physical and mentally disabilities

**Situational Factors**

- Fractured families (throwaway teens)
- Aging out of foster care
- Domestic violence

**Goal-Setting: Response to the Key Root Causes of Homelessness**

Keeping in mind that Gratiot County would like to keep these vision elements in front of our committee when drafting goals: safety for families, stability, providing a home environment, affordability, resource availability, sustainability, easy access to housing, county, community and agency supported, with transitional and supported systems as a safety net so people don't fall back into the same situation... here are our recommendations:

**Lack of Life Skills**

**Goal 1:**

- Prepare homeless individuals and their families for housing permanency by completing housing first assessments, making budget/financial management classes a pre-requisite for receiving help; in some situations; offered in others.

**Steps to Achievement:**

- Committee to plan, develop housing first assessment tool, secure teachers, facilities, develop a curriculum
- Provide education for life skills following placement in housing

- Include banking education, coupon/savvy shopping, balancing checkbooks, use of debit and credit cards, and parenting skills

**Measures:**

- Committee formed by 11/06
- Support from key resources received by 11/06
- Curriculums developed by 1/07
- Classes offered 3/07

**Public Policy**

**Goal 1:** Obtain on-going buy-in from county leaders and members.

**Steps to Achievement:**

- Committee to plan, and facilitate action steps
- Human service agencies will agree to use a tracking system to collect data on homelessness
- Development of a baseline of numbers of homeless and needs of those homeless
- Collect data monthly, i.e. extent of homelessness, costs of homelessness, benefits to addressing homelessness
- Identify stakeholder list
- Schedule meetings, with invitations to a cross section of county members/leaders
- Arrange data to present to county commissioners and community officials
- Have people who are familiar both with the concerns of the homeless, agencies, and government officials present findings for credibility
- Provide education through meetings with stakeholders

**Measures:**

- Committee formed by 12/06
- Stakeholders identified by 8/07
- Data collection system developed by 10/07
- Data collection by 10/08
- Stakeholder meetings begin 11/08 through 5/09

**Goal 2:** Support a system which makes access to community members 24/7

**Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.

- Development of 211 system in Gratiot County.
- Development of volunteer network of community members
- Obtain facility to house county agencies providing human services

### **Measures**

- By December, 2007 the plan will be in place for a 211 system
- 211 up and running by June, 2008
- A facility for housing human service agencies under one roof by 5/09

**Goal 3:** Multi-agency collaboration, especially for potential funding, development of advocacy subcommittee

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Obtain agencies' agreement to collaborate
- Decide on advocacy sub committee role
- Development of advocacy sub-committee
- Design tool for signature of agencies (MOU)
- Explore Great system

### **Measures**

- Agreement of agencies to collaborate by 5/07
- Plans for sub-committee and MOU accomplished by 2/08

### **Lack of Affordable Housing**

**Goal 1:** Develop a housing first model to be used in each agency providing shelter.

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to draft plan, identify populations to be served, create assessment tool by November 5, 2007
- Explore utilization of existing permanent housing sites by November 5, 2007 and ongoing
- Schedule and facilitate meetings with potential landlords by November 5, 2007 and ongoing
- Obtain agreements from landlords by November 15, 2007 and ongoing
- Determine agencies to provide various services by November 5, 2007
- Obtain commitment from agencies by November 15, 2007
- Obtain funding for project by January 1, 2007 and ongoing

### **Measures**

- Population identified and assessment plan created
- Sites identified
- Landlords engaged
- Agencies committed; MOU's signed
- Funds obtained

**Goal 2:** Determine a single point of entry for general population seeking temporary shelter.

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Explore utilization of Salvation Army and other options
- Obtain buy-in for resource sharing
- Compatible software needed for forms, checklists between agencies
- Visit other sheltering programs and obtain information
- Decide on an agency to house staff for and facilitate applications
- Vouchers and or shelter facilities
- Funding for sheltering costs
- Obtain collaboration regarding one stop; including from Housing Commissions (both Alma and St. Louis)

### **Measures**

- System in place for referring to, reimbursing, etc. identified point of entry by 5/07
- Evaluations from referring agencies and point of entry 10/07 & ongoing
- Stats of number of persons assisted 6/07 & ongoing
- Reports annually to the community 6/07 & ongoing
- Reports quarterly to the Collaborative Council 6/07 & ongoing

**Goal 2:** Eliminate "black listing"

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Develop a tool to gather data regarding number of current black listed
- Obtain agencies agreement to utilize above named tool
- Collect data using tool
- Enlist involvement of multi-agencies for skill development
- Provide case management support
- Provide transition housing and education
- Educate landlords
- Develop a "report card" of education utilized by black listed person

## Measures

- Committee developed by 6/07
- Plan and tools in place by 2/08
- Landlord and committee meeting set by 3/08
- Meetings held by 5/08
- Three and six months tracking of home maintenance and payment of rents.
- Survey of landlords and tenants in one year to measure success.
- Compare current number of homeless who can't attain housing due to black listing; to number following intervention

### **Goal 3:** Increase HUD supplemented housing availability

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Investigate federal low income housing tax credits
- Complete needs assessment
- Gather data from needs assessment
- Present data from needs assessment and housing first model to be used in placement and service provision
- Obtain commitment from developers
- Complete development of plan for low income units
- Seek and obtain funding from HUD, MSHDA, and other sources
- Complete construction of low income units

## Measures

- Information regarding housing tax credits by 6/07
- Needs assessment completed by 12/07
- Developers for housing on board by 12/08
- Funding sought by 2/10
- Funding obtained by 6/10
- Plans for housing completed by 12/09
- Housing completed by 12/12

**Goal 4:** Supportive housing needs are met for county residents in need of temporary or permanent supportive housing with casework services.

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Forecast needs; Gratiot County has a large number of developmentally disabled individuals but with the aging population, that number should be going down

- Look at demographics on aging population and its impact on the need for assisted living
- Explore ways to provide pharmaceutical assistance
- Measure impact of spouses' dying and the loss of benefits to surviving spouse
- Explore continuum of individuals in independent living to those who need supported housing
- Assess individual needs using housing first assessment tool/model
- Explore issues related to long waiting list for assisted living homes
- Address the issue of long waiting list
- Collaborate with developers and landlords contacting developers to address housing needs and current availability

### **Measures**

- Form committees by 5/07
- Develop data by 2/08
- Developers for housing on board by 12/08
- Funding sought by 2/10
- Funding obtained by 6/10
- Plans for housing completed by 12/09
- Housing completed by 12/12

### **Situational Factors**

**Goal 1:** Safe, confidential, handicap accessible permanent housing and supportive services provided for those homeless or at risk of being homeless due to being discharged from healthcare facilities, violence, substance abuse, and/or other addictive behaviors.

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Needs assessment to determine current number of units/programs needed
- Work with Clare & Isabella counties to enhance capacity and handicap accessibility of current DV shelter serving all 3 counties
- Plan facility upgrading
- Identify and seek funding sources
- Identify current resources, in-patient facilities
- Work with Gratiot County Substance Abuse Committee to identify current resources and need of persons with substance abuse
- Provide substance abuse and other addiction counseling including assessment and/or commitment into treatment programs

- Provide safe, confidential housing for domestic violence victims using housing first assessment tool
- Research and apply for funding resources for permanent housing solutions
- Develop community group to educate how these issues affect homelessness and gain buy-in

### **Measures**

- Committee by 11/06
- Needs assessed by 12/06
- Plans for permanent housing solutions, funds secured by 1/07
- Plans for updating DV shelter by 12/08
- Funding options to update DV shelter explored by 2/09
- Funds obtained by 8/09
- Updates/enhancements completed by 12/10
- DV emergency housing and housing first model current and on-going
- Substance abuse assessments, counseling, and housing first assessments and permanent placements current and on-going
- Number of DV victims housed, permanently housed and provided with services
- Number of substance abuse persons provided with supportive services

**Goal 2:** Provide youth in transition services with a focus on the housing first model for housing permanency, to youth aging out of foster care, and couch surfing.

### **Steps to Achievement**

- Committee to plan, identify agencies to help, enlist help, etc.
- Collect data on number of homeless youth
- Collect data on number of youth aging out of foster care
- Obtain Family to Family and Youth in Transition funds for the county
- Decide on what agency will provide casework services
- Provide casework services to include housing first assessment and placement
- Obtain program information from Listening Ear of Mt. Pleasant