Homeless Continuum of Care of Stark County

2015 Annual Report

No one should experience homelessness. No one should be without a safe, stable place to call home.
Who Are We?

The Homeless Continuum of Care of Stark County (“the Stark County Continuum” or “the Continuum”) was created in July 2013 to plan, implement, evaluate, and continuously improve the system of homeless services in Stark County.

The formation of the Continuum and its operation in conformance with detailed regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) enables local programs serving the homeless to apply for state and federal funds for which they would otherwise be ineligible. Annually, these funds include about $2.3 million from HUD’s Continuum of Care Grant competition, about $215,000 in federal Emergency Solutions Grant funds, and about $854,000 in state funds.

As required by HUD for all continuums of care (“CoCs”), the Stark County Continuum consists of individual members representing a broad group of “relevant organizations,” all of which have a role to play in ending homelessness. These members meet three times a year to share information, discuss priorities, and review progress in improving Stark County’s homeless system.

An 17-person board of directors and various committees that include both directors and Continuum members meet more frequently to ensure that the Continuum fulfills the many responsibilities that HUD assigns to CoCs.

These responsibilities include:

- Collecting and analyzing local data on homelessness;
- Developing and implementing plans to fill gaps in housing and services for the homeless;
- Operating a central intake and assessment system which ensures that all requests for homeless services are registered, evaluated, and prioritized in a consistent way;
- Annually inviting, reviewing, ranking, and consolidating in a single “collaborative application” local requests to HUD for Continuum of Care Grants; and
- Monitoring the performance and evaluating the outcomes of programs that receive federal Continuum of Care or Emergency Solutions grant funds.

To an increasing extent, the Stark County Continuum is also called upon to play an active role in (1) reviewing and endorsing applications that its local homeless programs submit to other state and federal funding sources and (2) evaluating the outcomes of these programs.

The national goals include ending homelessness among veterans in 2015; ending homelessness for the “chronically homeless” in 2017; and ending homelessness among families with children and unaccompanied youth in 2020.

1. Developed by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Opening Doors plan was originally issued in 2010 and was subsequently amended in 2012 and again in 2015. The 2015 edition of the plan is available at [http://usich.gov/opening_doors/](http://usich.gov/opening_doors/)
First Annual Report on Homelessness in Stark County

This report is the first in a proposed series of annual reports that the Stark County Continuum will issue to the community.

These reports will describe conditions in Stark County that contribute to homelessness; provide information about the homeless and those at risk of homelessness; and describe both the challenges we face and the progress we are making in meeting the national goals to end homelessness outlined in Opening Doors, the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness.¹

These goals include ending homelessness among veterans in 2015, ending homelessness for the “chronically homeless” in 2017, and ending homelessness among families with children and unaccompanied youth in 2020.

Conditions in Stark County That Contribute to Homelessness

As the federal Opening Doors plan notes, the number of homeless individuals and families across the country has surged since the 1980s as the result of “a convergence of key factors: the loss of affordable housing and increases in foreclosures; wages and public assistance that have not kept pace with rising housing costs and the cost of living, in part as a result of job loss and underemployment, and resulting debt; and the closing of state psychiatric institutions without the concomitant creation of sufficient community-based housing and services.”

All of these same factors have contributed and continue to contribute to homelessness in Stark County and to the frequency with which individuals and families are forced into unsustainable, “doubled-up” living arrangements with family or friends. In the City of Canton, where almost 32 percent of households survive on incomes at or below the poverty line, the incidence of homelessness is particularly high.

Various data sources, including recent analyses of local housing conditions prepared by or for Stark County and the City of Canton, have identified thousands of households in the county (including the City of Canton) that are considered “cost-burdened” because they are obliged to spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, either as renters or owners.

Among other things, the data indicates that:

- In the county as a whole, there are 5,395 rental households and 5,596 owner households with incomes at or below 80 percent of area median income (AMI) that pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing;
- There are enough affordable housing units to serve only about 20 percent of the county’s 9,569 poorest households, i.e., households with incomes at or below 30 percent of AMI;
- Minimum-wage, single-income households cannot afford a housing unit renting for the HUD fair market rent in Stark County;
- Persons receiving a monthly social security income check as their sole source of income, such as those with disabilities, also cannot afford a one-bedroom unit renting for the HUD fair market rent in Stark County;
- An increasing demand for rental properties is driving up the cost of rents; and
- While rental costs have been rising in recent years, rental household incomes have been falling.
Measuring Local Progress

Annual Point-in-Time Count

Each year, during the last week in January, Stark County conducts the annual HUD-mandated Point-in-Time (PIT) Count. Through the PIT process, staff of service agencies and community volunteers try to obtain an accurate tally of the current number and characteristics of people living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, on the streets, or in places unfit for human habitation. Historically, this count has been HUD’s primary tool for determining whether communities are making progress in reducing homelessness.

Judging from our PIT Counts, following a spike in homelessness in 2013, Stark County has made some progress in reducing homelessness over the last two years. The homeless count of 522 in 2013 dropped to 510 in 2014 and 472 in 2015.

However, these numbers do not tell the entire story. It is important to keep in mind that they reflect only our best estimate of the number of homeless at a certain point in time during the year—a time when, because of the severe cold, people who might otherwise be homeless are most successful in prevailing upon friends and families to provide them with temporary shelter.

On average, the number of literally homeless people that turn to the Continuum for housing assistance in the course of a year is just over six times the number identified in the PIT Count. This does not include the households who are at risk of homelessness who access the Continuum’s homelessness prevention services.

More sobering is the fact that, according to the PIT Count, the number of homeless living on the streets or in places unfit for human habitation increased between 2014 and 2015: from 38 to 60.

The increase in the count of individuals who consider themselves “precariously housed” has also increased. That number rose by only 3 percent between 2014 and 2015. However, it has been rising steadily over the last seven years, increasing from 246 in 2009 and to 516 in 2015.
The increasing number of individuals precariously housed with family and friends and burdened by housing costs translates into a growing number of housing crises that are reflected in the steadily escalating volume of calls received by the Homeless Hotline.

Starting in 2011 with 10,948 calls, that volume swelled to 13,835 in 2014. Extrapolating from the number of calls received during the first seven months of the current year, the Hotline expects the 2015 total to exceed 14,100.

**Annual Performance Measures**

HUD has announced that, in the future, it will be relying largely on the following performance measures in scoring communities’ applications for competitive CoC Grant Funds:

- **The number of homeless persons within a community;**
- **The number of first-time homeless persons within the community;**
- **The length of time homeless persons within the community remain homeless;**
- **The extent to which persons who exit homelessness to permanent housing destinations return to homelessness; and**
- **The success CoC-funded programs have in securing employment for homeless persons and helping them increase their income.**

Currently, CoC data systems are being programmed to meet HUD specifications for calculating the quantities relevant to each of these measures.

Also, before the standards are implemented, HUD must decide whether, for each of these performance measures, it will set uniform targets that all communities must reach or gauge communities’ success by their rate of improvement over time.

When the questions pertaining to the standards have been resolved, the Stark County Continuum will include in its annual report an account of its performance as measured by these standards.
Who Are the Homeless?

An array of factors contribute to homelessness, and, as a result, homeless individuals and families have various types and levels of need. Some homeless persons require only temporary financial assistance and limited support services to weather a passing crisis and secure stable housing. Others need permanent housing subsidies and more intensive, wraparound services to maintain housing over the long term.

In addressing the needs of the homeless, the Stark County Continuum works with other systems serving discrete “subpopulations” of homeless to ensure that funding and services are coordinated in a way that makes efficient use of resources and optimizes outcomes for clients who are being served by more than one system.

In addition, it gives precedence to those subpopulations that the federal government has identified as immediate priorities: veterans and the chronically homeless.
Veterans

As indicated above, the federal government’s Opening Doors plan established a goal of ending homelessness among veterans in 2015. In many communities, including Stark County, that goal is now within reach due largely to the substantial amount of new funding Congress has appropriated for housing programs serving veterans.

Although the 2015 PIT Count identified 26 homeless veterans in Stark County, as of early August 2015, the Continuum’s prioritization list included only five veterans, two of whom were close to obtaining housing. Unfortunately, the same conditions that keep Stark County’s very low income residents at risk of homelessness make many veterans susceptible to housing loss, resulting in new cases of homelessness among veterans every year.

The Stark County Veterans’ Task Force, chaired by ICAN Housing, coordinates efforts among individuals and agencies serving veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Members of the Task Force include representatives of the Veterans Administration, the Veterans Service Commission of Stark County, Congressman Gibbs’ and Congressman Renacci’s offices, the Stark Metropolitan Housing Authority, the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority, the Stark County Community Corrections Center, and the Stark County Court of Common Pleas.

The HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program has been an especially effective tool in reducing homelessness among veterans across the nation. As Stark County has exhausted the supply of housing vouchers under this program, the Task Force has assumed responsibility for helping to secure other funding to house homeless veterans.

At the end of 2014, the Task Force decided to pilot a rapid re-housing program specifically for veterans and launched a limited campaign to fund this program. This effort attracted the funds needed to house five veterans and provide them with supportive services while they found employment and took other steps to stabilize their situations. Recently, the Task Force agreed to continue this program and conduct an expanded fund-raising campaign in 2015 to ensure that ample funds are on hand in the future to quickly re-house veterans who become homeless.

Additional services for very low income veterans’ families who are either at risk of or transitioning from homelessness may also be available soon through the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program. Family and Community Services, Inc., a Ravenna-based organization that participates in the Task Force, has already applied for SSVF funding. If obtained, that funding will be used to provide a wide range of services designed to promote housing stability for Stark County veterans.
Under HUD guidelines, the “chronically homeless” include (1) individuals with a disabling condition who have been continuously homeless for at least one year or on at least four separate occasions in the past three years and (2) families with an adult head of household who meets these criteria.

When it was amended in 2015, the five-year old Opening Doors plan extended from 2015 to 2017 the federal goal for ending chronic homelessness. In doing so, however, the plan acknowledged that even this timeline is overly optimistic unless Congress supports the President’s FY 2016 budget, which includes increased funding to support “permanent supportive housing.”

Permanent supportive housing is considered to be the appropriate type of housing, both for the chronically homeless and for others with one or more disabling conditions that constitute a persistent obstacle to success in maintaining decent and affordable community-based housing. Once individuals and families are admitted to a permanent supportive housing program, there is no limit to the amount of time they can spend in the program as long as they meet the basic obligations of tenancy.

Between 2009 and 2015, the Stark County Continuum increased by over 47 percent (from 330 to 487) the number of persons served by permanent supportive housing programs. Based on the recommendation of Corporation for Supportive Housing, a consulting group with extensive experience in Stark County, the Continuum decided in 2014 to develop 45 additional units of permanent supportive housing as available resources allowed. Plans for 38 of those units have been developed and are, for the most part, fully funded.

Stark County’s 2015 PIT Count identified as chronically homeless 67 people, including 50 individuals and 5 families. In the months thereafter, moreover, the number of people registering for housing services who identified themselves as chronically homeless more than doubled. Thus, there is a possibility that, to end chronic homelessness, Stark County will eventually need more than the 45 additional permanent supportive housing units it is targeting at the moment.

However, during the next several months, the Continuum will be taking additional steps to verify the existing need before increasing its goal for new units.
Nearly half of the people identified in the 2015 PIT Count (228 out of 472) were members of households with minor children. According to the 2014 analysis performed by Corporation for Supportive Housing, the county needs about 9 additional units of permanent supportive housing for families. To satisfy that need, Alliance for Children and Families is developing a 10-unit complex in Canton.

More recent assessments have shown that the vast majority of families that are homeless currently need “rapid re-housing” rather than permanent supportive housing. Typically, rapid re-housing programs consist of three components: (1) help in securing housing; (2) short-to-medium term rental and utilities assistance to maintain housing while the family’s situation stabilizes; and (3) case management to help secure employment and other resources that will enable the family to remain housed in the future without ongoing support.

Although HUD has vigorously promoted rapid re-housing over the last several years as an effective and comparatively low-cost intervention, our Continuum has been slow to expand its rapid re-housing capacity. Last year, the Continuum made the decision to reallocate a significant portion of its HUD funding to the county’s sole rapid re-housing program for families, which is run by the YWCA. When that funding becomes available late in 2015, we expect to be able to reduce significantly the amount of time families with children remain in shelter.

In the meantime, the YWCA has used both private foundation dollars from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton and Temporary Assistance to Needy Family funds from the Department of Job and Family Services to bolster its rapid re-housing effort and to stabilize families at imminent risk of homelessness.
Unaccompanied Youth

For purposes of the Opening Doors plan, “unaccompanied youth” include (1) persons under the age of 25 who are not “presenting or sleeping in the same place as their parent or legal guardian” and (2) persons under the age of 25 who are themselves the parent or legal guardian of one or more children who are present with or sleeping in the same place as that youth parent, where there is no person over the age of 24 in the household.

With the goal of ending homelessness among unaccompanied youth by 2020, HUD and other federal agencies have launched efforts to develop better data that will enable them to understand the scale and nature of homelessness within this population. Thus, for the first time in 2015, HUD required communities to institute special measures to count and report their homeless youth.

In Stark County, the results of this count were as follows:

**Number of youth households:** 49, including 18 households with parenting youth

**Number of persons in those households:** 75, including 31 unaccompanied youth, 22 parenting youth, and 22 minor children of parenting youth.

All unaccompanied and parenting youth identified in the count were between the ages of 18 and 24. There is widespread agreement that it is extremely difficult to obtain an accurate count of unaccompanied youth because they tend to avoid homeless shelters and, instead, “couch surf” with friends or seek shelter in abandoned buildings. However, the Continuum’s Youth Committee meets on a regular basis to discuss better ways to identify homeless youth in Stark County and to address their special needs.

In addition, during the last year, the Continuum and the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board have been working with Coleman Behavioral Health to secure property and state funding to build 10 new units of permanent supportive housing for homeless youth suffering from one or more disabilities.
Victims of Domestic Violence

One hundred and six (106) of the 472 homeless persons identified in the 2015 PIT Count reported being a victim of domestic violence.

Though the domestic violence service providers in Stark County must maintain their own separate, confidential information system in order to safeguard the identities of their clients, they work closely with the Continuum to ensure that individuals and families fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence who seek homeless services can access their emergency protective shelters.

Within the last year, the domestic violence service providers and the Continuum have been striving to improve the communication and coordination between them, and this work is yielding positive results.

The domestic violence shelters provide a vital service in the county, and they are now better able to focus on providing necessary supports to their clients to help them maintain long-term independence from their abusers.
The 350 homeless adults identified in Stark County’s 2015 PIT Count include 283 (81 percent) who have a serious mental illness, some type of substance use disorder, or both.

As the chart shows, 39 percent of the adults counted suffered from severe mental illness while an additional 29 percent suffered co-occurring disorders, that is, a serious mental illness along with a substance use disorder.

The Continuum works closely with the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board and its partner agencies in developing housing programs that meet the needs of this population and in securing and combining various sources of funding to support these programs.

To promote ongoing communication and cooperation between the homeless system and the mental health and recovery services system, the Mental Health Board’s executive director serves on the Continuum’s Board, and other Mental Health Board staff members are active on several Continuum committees.
Just over 70 percent of all homeless adults identified in the 2015 PIT Count (249 of 350) had criminal records, and many of these individuals had been convicted of multiple offenses.

Although the vast majority of the offenses they committed were minor, including such infractions as trespassing, public intoxication, and disorderly conduct, the total of 895 convictions shared by these 249 ex-offenders also included 17 convictions for sexual offenses, 58 for domestic violence, and 2 for murder/manslaughter.

Adults with criminal records face significant barriers to moving out of shelters into permanent housing because, by and large, landlords will not rent to them and employers will not hire them. Yet, certainly, the public feels safer if these individuals are not roaming the streets, and HUD expects communities to find ways to house them.

Thus, we as a community must figure out a way to provide more housing for this population.
Building Our Infrastructure

Central Intake, Assessment, and Prioritization
During 2014, much of the Continuum’s attention was focused on developing the type of central intake, assessment, and prioritization system required by HUD. In such a system, clients seeking homeless services go through one designated “front door” to be connected to available homeless services.

Currently, in Stark County, persons seeking homeless services must call the Homeless Hotline, which is operated by a team at the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board. Hotline staff members interview callers and conduct an evidence-based assessment over the phone to evaluate their housing and service needs. Based on the assessment results, the staff places callers on a central prioritization list and ranks them on the list according to the severity of their needs.

When a housing program has a vacancy, it fills it from this prioritization list, offering it to the highest ranked individual or household that is eligible for its program. Through this system, those with the most acute needs are served first—as HUD requires.

The Continuum is waiting to gain experience under this new scheme before making any changes. However, it expects to begin reexamining and refining processes in late 2015.

Homelessness Prevention
In 2015, the Continuum has turned its attention to developing an integrated system of homelessness prevention and emergency assistance for individuals and families at risk of homelessness.

Funding to prevent evictions and foreclosures is currently available from many sources, including a collaborative group of agencies funded by United Way, and a large number of churches in the area. However, there is limited communication and coordination among these programs. With the help of a consultant, the Continuum is working with the programs to explore ways to more effectively organize and deploy their funds to keep households from becoming homeless.

Outreach Services
In response to the increase in the number of unsheltered homeless detected during the 2015 Point-in-Time Count, the Continuum has begun to explore the possibility of expanding its efforts to locate and reach out to persons living “on the streets” and in places unfit for human habitation.

Currently, within the Continuum, outreach services are provided exclusively by ICAN Housing with staff funded primarily by grants from the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board. Through consultations with ICAN and the Mental Health Board, the Continuum will determine whether additional outreach staff and additional funding sources are needed.

Building the Capacity of the Continuum
Finally, the Continuum will devote considerable energy during 2015 to developing a plan that will enable it to secure the permanent, professional staff it needs to remain competitive for state and federal funding.

Burdensome new requirements from these funding sources make it impossible for the Continuum to function—as it has in the past—with temporary staff on loan from other organizations. Therefore, the Continuum will be looking to the communities that benefit from the dollars it generates to help fund the managerial and administrative services it needs.
Board of Directors

Jean Van Ness, Chair
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton

John Aller, Vice Chair
Mental Health & Recovery Services Board

Shirene Starn-Tapyrik, Treasurer
Alliance for Children & Families

Pastor Jeffrey Shultz, Secretary
Massillon Area Clergy Association

Michael Cody
Stark Metropolitan Housing Authority

Vicki Conley
Community Volunteer

Lynne Dragomier
Community Volunteer

Amanda Fletcher
ICAN Housing

Marla Heega
United Way of Greater Stark County

Cathy Jennings
YWCA of Canton

Beverly Jordan
Stark Social Workers Network

David Kamienski
Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce

Lisa Miller
City of Canton

Beth Pearson
Stark County Regional Planning Commission

Kelly Perry
Canton City Schools

Nedra Petro
Stark County Department of Job & Family Services

Crystal Sandor
Veterans Service Commission
Inquiries or comments about this report can be directed to:

Jean Van Ness
jvanness@scfcanton.org
or
Shannon McMahon Williams
swilliams@scfcanton.org