

Berks Coalition for the Homeless

Formation

Previously in the community, homelessness was approached by a volunteer organization which included representatives from a number of service providers. The collaboration came about to solidify this fragmented and voluntary effort into a strong, unified, cohesive effort among all social service providers in Berks County. Initially, only a few providers were involved but direct efforts have increased participation to over 40 agencies and government entities. The Coalition has reached out to formerly homeless individuals to join the effort as they add a unique perspective to program decision-making. The Coalition approached all members of the community who might have a "stake" in improving the lives of the impoverished. As a result government agencies, private companies, landlords, and individuals involved became involved, along with the social services agencies.

Management

The collaboration was spearheaded by our current Board officers and current Executive Director who saw the need for a more coordinated effort. The Executive Director is primarily responsible for the operations of the Coalition, and the Board oversees policy making. We meet once a month, and during those meetings we are able to address programming challenges. Because of this collaboration, we have improved communication, streamlined programs, and addressed issues more quickly and efficiently than ever before.

Challenges

The Executive Director is able to help bridge communications and works with all the agencies to oversee gaps or duplications in services. That way, agencies can adjust and deliver services more efficiently. In addition, any problems or challenges unique to the homeless population can be addressed at the monthly meeting. Solutions are arrived at collaboratively in that all members discuss the problems and come to a mutual decision to handle it.

Impact

Agencies in our community that serve the homeless record their data in our Homeless Management Information System. Using that data we are able to track the number of homeless, services provided, outcomes of services, and whether the individual was connected with services, etc. Through this data we have been able to show, for instance, that homelessness has decreased 21% in the past two years since our inception. We attribute that to the Coalition's efforts. We are starting to develop new ways to measure outcomes and track services so that we can have additional measurable data to present to funders.

Berks Coalition for the Homeless

Model

Because of our size and mutual efforts, we have done something quite unique in Pennsylvania. We are one of the only Homeless Coalitions in our state to incorporate and oversee homeless programming, using all provider agencies as "managers". Each agency is a member and has a say at our meetings. We are proud that so many agencies have been able to work together amicably to create a new collaboration that works toward preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness in our County. Those agencies work side by side with private companies, formerly homeless individuals, and business representatives to form a truly collaborative effort.

Efficiencies Achieved

John Nash, in his Economic Theory of Governing Dynamics stated that the win/win scenario is dependent upon each member of the group doing what's best for himself and the group. If each member only did what was best for himself, it could not be an effective collaboration. It's not easy to achieve the effectiveness Nash theorized about, but once applied, amazing things can happen.

A community the size of Berks County is unique because it is large and diverse yet small enough to not become unmanageable. Berks County has an affluent population. In the center of Berks is the City of Reading, which has a population of about 85,000 people, 35% of which live below the poverty level. This situation creates a unique problem. Our agencies, through our collaboration, can view the various programs that make the most sense, the programs that are truly needed, and target them to the precise population, hoping to avoid duplication and redundancy. The way this is achieved is that our Coalition, named Berks Coalition to End Homelessness or BCEH meets to discuss the best delivery of programs. Because our collaboration is so new (only two years old) we are just now starting to compile the data we need to "prove" our effectiveness. We know we have been effective in the community because of the positive changes, but we will need hard data to show everyone else and that is the process we are going through right now. One clear example is how our collaboration proved effective during this past year in managing the federal stimulus monies aimed at homelessness called "Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program." This program brought 2.1 million dollars to our county to prevent and reduce homelessness. Because of the Coalition and the effective working relationships we have, we were able to form a project management group dubbed "The Super Team." The Super Team was able to determine the best way to manage these new federal monies to effect the most change. For instance, we determined that the target populations would be MH/MR (mental health, mental retardation), the forensic population, meaning those incarcerated individuals facing imminent release, as well as the population at-large. One agency handled county requests, and two handled city requests. All agencies are part of the Coalition as are all members of The Super Team. This strategy proved effective. Although the funds only began being distributed in the fall of 2009, by July of 2010 we saw significant reductions in the homeless populations. The number of persons in families with

Berks Coalition for the Homeless

children went from 45 formerly homeless in January 2010 to 221 by the July count a 391% increase. There was a 275% increase in those single adults dubbed formerly homeless as well. Overall for those persons formerly homeless we saw a nearly 500% increase in those persons formerly homeless meaning they were homeless during the last count but have since been helped in permanent housing or permanent supportive housing in the community. Our decreases in the homeless population were not as significant, but there were some decreases. We believe that because of the problems in the economy during this period, with our County showing nearly 10% unemployment, we were fighting an uphill battle so to speak. So the fact that we had slight increases in some areas of the homeless count, still gave us tremendous hope that our approach worked. We saw a 5% decrease in the homeless population sheltered in emergency shelters from January 2010 to July. We considered that to be as a result of the additional funds available to rehouse those made homeless more quickly into new, better situations. Over all we did see an increase in the total homeless population in our area of 7.3% but again, we were climbing an uphill battle against one of the worst economies in decades.

Because of the effective collaboration of the Coalition, with all parties working together to target the populations involved, we have been able to see dramatic decreases in the target group. A second example of our effectiveness would be in the program service delivery, although this quantifier is more vague. We are just now beginning to collect data to measure our success here. By looking at the entire homeless program delivery, all 50 agencies involved can take an honest look at the central intake process – where a person goes for their initial assessment, and then into which program they get placed. We have one emergency shelter for singles. We have a second agency that provides shelter for families. We have yet another whose focus is pregnant teens. We have yet another whose focus is youth. By “combining forces” so to speak we eliminate the possibility of redundancy and improve effective delivery. We are just now starting to compile statistics on this aspect of our collaboration.

Evolution

Initially the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness was a volunteer organization made up of caring persons within the Berks County area who wanted to see some change in the way the homeless population was addressed. But over time it was realized that the Coalition lacked effectiveness due to its voluntary status. Most people involved in the Coalition worked at other agencies or companies, and after their once a month meeting, did little to advance the process. In 2008, after continual frustration by mainly the HUD applicants over the low point score on the Housing and Urban Development funding application, several key individuals began discussions on forming the Coalition into its own company. By forming a lead collaborative agency, a Director could be hired, grants could be pursued, and we could have a more cohesive and effective structure going forward. The key people involved were mainly Executive Directors of other nonprofits, myself – who at the time was Chair of the Coalition (voluntary) – and some key government agency personnel.

Berks Coalition for the Homeless

The management structure was an easy decision. We started out by forming a Board of Directors. This Board would include all the Agency Directors that receive HUD monies for homeless services. The total number of those agencies is 11. We wanted the Board to also be made up of At-Large Directors who would be all non-HUD members. Their total would always be at least one more than the HUD members for a total Board of 23. The current Executive Committee is made up of the following: Scott Rehr, Executive Director of Berks Connections, the agency that assists the incarcerated individuals and helps run the Community Correction Center; George Vogel, Executive Director of the Council on Chemical Abuse, Modesto Fiume, Executive Director of Opportunity House, our Emergency Shelter; Carol Bailey, Housing Director for Berks Counseling Center; and Dave Reyher, Executive Director of Easy Does It, Inc., a nationally recognized recovery center. There are 18 more individuals representing the homeless, faith-based organizations, mental health organizations, other housing programs, the County of Berks and the City of Reading, and many other groups.

There are always some challenges when forming a new company and a new collaboration, and we had our share. Funding always presents some challenges, but we were lucky because the HUD-funded agencies believed in what we were doing and were willing to climb on board and get the ball rolling with funds. Each contributed 1% of their HUD grant to our effort giving us our first \$20K. Dues from other members provided an additional \$15K. The County and City promised \$20K each – and with this we had enough to get rolling. Eventually we realized some new grants and new opportunities. Currently we have an annual budget of \$140K. Another challenge was getting all providers to come on Board, but this was not as difficult as we first thought. We had one local homeless provider, whose organization housed nearly 100 single men in both emergency shelter and permanent housing. Having this faith-based group on Board with us was essential to our collective success. Soon after we formed the Coalition, a new Executive Director was named to this group, and he saw the need for community collaboration whereas his predecessor did not. We met several times, offered volunteer hands when he worked on a new project, invited him into our Homeless Management Information System, and got him to come to some meetings. It has been a slow process, but he is fully integrated into the Coalition and was just elected to our Board of Directors in October. The City of Reading has also presented some challenges to us which we have not yet been able to overcome. Recently Reading went into Act 47 which is really the first step before declaring bankruptcy. Like many cities its size, Reading is seeing the effects of high crime, high unemployment, and other factors that cause a decrease in revenue and increase in expenses. We have had little more than lip-service from City officials regarding support for our Coalition. Initial promises of funding never materialized. We continue to try and work with the City to make them see that ignoring the problems of homelessness does not make it go away.

We continue to see the benefits of our collaboration in everything we do as a group. We take pride in the individual achievements of our members. Because of our collaboration, we can offer more opportunities to our members to work together. The Coalition sees the whole picture and helps fit pieces of the “puzzle” together. If this agency wants to branch into more areas, we can pair two agencies together. At this point, as said earlier, we are still measuring our success. We

Berks Coalition for the Homeless

know that it is working. First of all, having a designated agency be the “point” person for dealing with HUD and HUD’s requirements, is much more efficient and effective. Secondly, we are able to depend on each other much more for the sharing of funds and resources. We have a huge Email network to which everyone belongs which allows us to share news, available resources or trainings, or notices quickly. One agency received a truckload of new mattresses. We broadcast that over the Coalition’s email service and within two days, the mattresses were picked up and delivered to the needy clients of our member agencies.

I know not having more measured results will probably hurt our application overall. As we are ending our second year of operation, we are able to just now begin collecting data and processing it to provide some measurable results for County and City officials as well as possible funders. However, we do see in the faces and the eyes of our clients that it is working. Every time we connect someone with the thing they need most – detox, counseling, housing, food, job training, tenant education, life skills, etc – we know it is working in our community.