

Nearly 8,000 families, individuals seek help with housing in eight months

Written by

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Stimulus money prevents homelessness, moves people off streets, out of shelters

Almost 8,000 families and single adults in Ramsey County needed help staying in their homes or finding a place to live because they were homeless, according to a report that covers the first eight months of a program funded with federal stimulus money.

In November 2009, the federal government allocated \$1.8 million in federal stimulus money to prevent homelessness in families and single adults and to quickly find housing for families and single adults who recently became homeless in Ramsey County. The funds established the Housing Crisis Response in Ramsey County. The funding runs November 2009 through October 2011.

Under the program, Catholic Charities provides help to single adults. Catholic Charities and the YWCA collaborate to provide help to families.

The report covers November 2009 to June 30, 2010. In that time, 4,770 single adults and 3,260 families called housing crisis response numbers looking for help.

Those numbers—and significant cost savings compared to providing emergency shelter for people after they become homeless—were among the findings in a report covering the program's first eight months.

"These numbers are staggering," said Tracy Berglund, Catholic Charities senior director of housing and emergency services. "They put in concrete numbers how many people find themselves on the verge of homelessness every day.

"We are grateful for the federal stimulus dollars that will help people for two years. But what happens after 24 months? We won't solve the crisis caused by lack of affordable housing simply because the calendar reads Nov. 1, 2011."

The program created three housing crisis lines for people living in Ramsey County to call for assistance. Catholic Charities staff screened the calls and referred the callers either to the appropriate area within Catholic Charities or the YWCA or to other social services providers in Ramsey County to meet needs such as utility support.

After screening, 296 people and 229 families met the criteria to receive help through the program funded with federal stimulus dollars. Criteria for receiving assistance are outlined in the full report.

The report proves the need for broader commitment by government to help those citizens who are most vulnerable, Berglund says.

Between November 1, 2009 and June 30, 2010, the program:

- Assisted 160 people who were at imminent risk of becoming homeless
- Found permanent stable housing for 136 people who were homeless
- About 95 percent of clients remained in their homes for at least three months

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- 87 percent of clients who were formerly homeless received positive feedback from their landlords
- Helped 173 families stay in their homes and avoid homelessness.
- Ninety percent of those families remained in their homes when they exited the program after six months.
- Helped 56 families who were homeless move into permanent homes.
- 75 percent of these families remained in their homes without any public financial assistance after six months.
- These families were placed through a collaboration with the YWCA.

The report also highlighted the cost savings of keeping people in their homes and moving them quickly from emergency shelters to permanent housing compared to providing emergency shelter when people are homeless:

- The average assistance provided by the program for single adults was \$480.
- The average cost for shelter per person per night at Catholic Charities Dorothy Day Center is \$10.02; Ninety days of emergency shelter for one person at the Dorothy Day Center is about \$900.
- Families who received help staying in their homes and thereby avoiding homelessness (prevention program dollars) received an average of \$675 each.
- In the first eight months, 173 families received a total of \$116,694.
- Emergency shelter for a family costs \$47 per bed per night at the Catholic Charities Ramsey County Family Service Center, the only emergency shelter for families in the county. A 30-day stay for a family of three costs \$4,230.
- The cost of providing emergency shelter for 173 families—assuming each has three members—for 30 days is \$731,790.

The report also notes that more people would benefit from prevention programs if criteria were rewritten. Under the criteria established through federal guidelines, people must be at imminent risk of becoming homeless, i.e., they must have been served with a foreclosure or eviction notice. People also must not have any other options, including staying with family members, and have no other resources.

“Rather than truly avoid a crisis, families and individuals are forced to wait until they are fully involved in a crisis and on the verge of losing their homes before they can receive help,” Berglund says. “This becomes a vicious cycle and causes additional stresses on people and on the social services system.

“We’ve proven these programs save money in the long term,” she says. “It’s time to stop cutting social services that serve the poor in a short-term fix to balance the budget. It’s long past time to fix the gaping hole in the safety net.”

Copies of the full reports can be found at cctwincities.org/HPRP