



HOMELESSNESS IN COLORADO: A STATE OF EMERGENCY

The situation is bleak. Increasing rates of poverty, little if any affordable housing, escalating unemployment, stagnant wages, rising foreclosures affecting rental tenants, unforeseen healthcare and disability expenses, and exorbitant food, power and gas costs have converged to force more people than ever into the complicated isolation of homelessness. Men, women and children of all ages are affected. Mayors around the country are reporting an increase in the number of working families who are, for the first time, requesting assistance. In some school districts the number of homeless students has doubled from the already high volumes reported last year. Homeless service providers are stunned by the speed with which the recent devastating social and economic impacts have taken place. Experts predict that those who have been insulated from these problems in the past may soon be affected at home or at work. And, government organizations and private foundations that fund the social safety net are now faced with limited resources to respond to growing levels of unmet need. Individual donors have fewer dollars with which to give. We are faced with a state of emergency.

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THE COLORADO COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS?

The mission of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) is to work collaboratively toward the prevention of homelessness and the creation of lasting solutions for homeless and at-risk families, children, and individuals throughout Colorado. CCH advocates for and provides a continuum of housing and a variety of services to improve the health, well-being and stability of those it serves. Since its founding almost 25 years ago, the Coalition has earned state and national recognition for its integrated healthcare, housing and service programs. The Coalition's comprehensive approach addresses the causes of homelessness, as well as the consequences, offering critical assistance to nearly 15,000 individuals and families each year. We believe in bold vision, decisive action and careful stewardship of resources. The Coalition is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

HOW DOES THE COALITION RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

We recognize that each homeless individual has a unique story and set of challenges. We work to meet their immediate needs, with the ultimate goal of helping them find and maintain housing. We realize that a home is critical for safety and security, for finding and holding a job, and for maintaining physical and emotional well-being. The Coalition provides direct services to over 12,000 homeless men, women and children each year.

WHAT SERVICES DOES THE COALITION PROVIDE?

Our services fall in three areas: housing, healthcare and social support services. The development of Permanent Affordable Housing is vital to our mission to create lasting solutions to homelessness. Thanks to the help of our generous donors and advocates, we provide homes for nearly 2,100 individuals and families. The Coalition's Healthcare Services are delivered primarily through the Stout Street Clinic - more than 12,000 homeless patients were treated in 2007. Other homeless support services provided by the Coalition include Street Outreach, Rental Assistance, Benefits Acquisition, Employment Counseling and Childcare.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE SOCIAL STIGMA OFTEN ATTACHED TO PERSONS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

We continually raise public awareness of homelessness at local, state and national levels through public education and legislative advocacy programs designed for policy-makers, community and business leaders, other homeless service organizations, students, the news media and the general public.

WHO IS HOMELESS AND WHY?

A shortage of affordable housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty are the two major trends responsible for the rise in homelessness over the past 25 years. Escalating unemployment, stagnant wages, rising foreclosures affecting renters and home owners, unforeseen health care and disability expenses or no health care at all, and exorbitant food, gas and utility costs have forced more people than ever into homelessness. Children under the age of 18 account for about 40 percent of the total homeless population in the U.S., 42 percent of these children are under the age of five. Single men comprise about 50 percent and single women, 17 percent. Nationally, approximately half of all women and children are experiencing homelessness and fleeing domestic violence. Forty percent of homeless men have served in the armed forces. Approximately 16 percent of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS IN COLORADO?

According to *The Colorado Statewide Homeless Count* point-in-time study, there were an estimated 16,203 homeless men, women and children on August 28, 2006. Of this total, more than 10,000 individuals were from the Denver Metro area. Due to the transient existence of people who are homeless, it is difficult to conduct an accurate census. These numbers are likely an undercount of state residents who are actually homeless on any given night of the year. Still, this point-in-time study is considered the most thorough and current count to date by government agencies and organizations working with the homeless.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS IN THE UNITED STATES?

As many as 3.5 million Americans are thought to experience homelessness each year – over 1.35 million of these are children. On any given night, at least 672,000 men, women and children are without homes in the United States.

HOW DOES HOMELESSNESS AFFECT FAMILIES AND CHILDREN?

Approximately 50 percent of the total homeless population is part of a family. If children being life experiencing homelessness, they will be sick more often than their housed peers, especially if they're 5 years old or younger. They'll have twice as many ear infections, four times as many asthma attacks, five times more stomach problems, six times as many speech problems, and twice as many hospitalizations – including 60 percent more emergency room visits, than housed kids.

HOW HAS THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS IN THE UNITED STATES IMPACTED HOMELESSNESS?

The foreclosure and economic crises are significantly increasing homelessness and the number of families at-risk of homelessness across the country, and in Colorado. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness has reported that preliminary data from cities and organizations is showing homelessness increases as much as 20 percent. In Denver, the number of employed persons who are homeless has increased over the past year because of the tightening job market and decreasing wages. Additionally, because of layoffs in the area, Denver has seen an increase in families experiencing homelessness. As we experience this mounting economic crisis, many of Denver's homeless housing and service providers are experiencing the record need. For example, the Coalition's Stout Street Clinic has seen a 16 percent increase in patient visits over the past year, and has been forced to put more than 120 homeless persons seeking mental health services on a waiting list.

CAN PEOPLE BE EMPLOYED AND BE HOMELESS?

Yes. Of the 3.5 million people estimated to be experiencing homelessness each year in the U.S., 42 percent of them are working. In Denver, 40 percent of people experiencing homelessness work; estimates in 24 other major U.S. cities are around 25 percent. Minimum wage jobs, primarily in the service sector, pay below even modest calculations of the cost of living. As a result, many working individuals and families find themselves with nowhere to turn but shelters and streets. In Colorado, there is not a single county where a minimum wage worker (@ \$7.02/hour) can afford the fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment, working 40 hours a week.

WHY IS THE COST OF HOUSING OUT OF REACH FOR SO MANY PEOPLE?

While the Federal minimum wage has risen only nominally since 1997, housing costs have significantly increased across the nation. As the subprime mortgage crisis forces moderate-income households to lower-cost rental housing, the poor find themselves increasingly squeezed out. The widening gap between housing cost and income puts millions of people at-risk of losing their homes and facing life on the streets or in shelters. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reports that in the last ten years, average rents have increased 75 percent in the Denver metro area. During the same period, average wages in the area increased only 47 percent.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED WHEN FORECLOSURES FORCE TENANTS OUT?

Mortgage foreclosures, involving rental properties, are becoming ever more frequent across the United States. Low-income and extremely low-income households are the most heavily impacted. Investor-owned one-to-four family rental properties account for nearly 20 percent of all foreclosures. Because many of the high-risk home purchase and refinance loans now in default are concentrated in low-income and minority communities, the fallout from foreclosures is hitting the same neighborhoods where many of the nation's most economically vulnerable renters live. The blighting influence of vacant and foreclosed properties also will accelerate the abandonment of low-cost rental properties in distressed neighborhoods, further limiting the supply of affordable housing.