

GUEST COLUMN: Guilford housing effort sees successes

Sunday, April 4, 2010

High Point Enterprise

By David S. Miller

If you're like me, when you first heard the term "ending chronic homelessness," you may have been skeptical. But please let me tell you how it is possible and, in fact, how we are making real progress in Guilford County to end chronic homelessness.

Over 300 cities and counties across the country are implementing plans to address this human tragedy. Guilford County became the 210th community to commit to develop a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness. In June 2007, we unveiled Partnering to End Chronic Homelessness in Guilford County, which focuses on Housing First and strengthening our community's system of care. The plan revealed that in 2007 on any given night over 1,200 people were homeless, sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, with more than 200 of those people experiencing chronic homelessness, which means they have been homeless for over a year or had multiple episodes of homelessness. They are also dealing with substance abuse, mental illness, "developmental disabilities," or in some cases two or all three of these conditions.

In Guilford County, we have been implementing our Ten Year Plan through the Partners Ending Homelessness Initiative for two years and we have already seen real progress. As of Dec. 31, we have housed over 100 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness through our Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing Initiatives throughout the county. This is remarkable considering our goal was to house 20 people per year for the next 10 years. We are well on our way to ending chronic homelessness in Guilford County and we know our mission is achievable.

I was in a meeting recently when I heard one of the program participants say "I heard about the Ten Year Plan and I thought it was 'outrageous;' now I am the Ten Year Plan, so thank you." This statement brought home to me the significance of the work we're doing. This gentleman went on to say that little by little he was becoming a human being again, and that's what the Ten Year Plan is all about – restoring people back to that human condition that so many of us take for granted in our own lives yet are unable to see in others.

It's a multi-faceted plan that takes many hands to bring to fruition. We need community leaders to acknowledge that it makes good business sense to provide job training to people who want to work and may have skill sets we can utilize. We need members of law enforcement, foster care agencies and hospitals to develop discharge plans well in advance of the discharge date that will plan for and enhance opportunities upon release from jails and institutions, rather than dumping people back onto the same streets on which they were found. We need to create affordable and permanent housing options and not just temporary, emergency shelters, so that people know where they will sleep at the end of each day.

We're a county rich in resources, yet we squander many of them and we can't afford to continue to do that. These are lives – human collateral, the most precious resource we have. Time counts.

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