



Project RUSH:

Research to Understand and Solve Homelessness

Overview

Twice a year, the Fox Cities Housing Coalition holds a Point-In-Time Count to identify the number of homeless individuals and families within our community. Steadily increasing over recent years, this count reveals that, on average, approximately 350-360 people (including children) are currently struggling with homelessness in the Fox Cities.

What this number **doesn't** tell us is exactly how many individuals and families are on the *edge of homelessness*, essentially one or two hard times away from needing emergency assistance. These individuals may be currently getting by with their housing situation by doubling up with friends and family, living in motels, or living on their own but struggling to pay rent or mortgage due to the unaffordable nature of their home. While not actively homeless, these housing situations are not considered stable for the long-term and as such, these individuals are at a greater risk for becoming homeless and needing housing services.

Termed the “hidden homeless,” these individuals and families are currently on the outside of our housing services periphery. Without the opportunity to (1) identify the number of individuals and families in this hidden homeless situation and (2) define the services they need to prevent them from sliding into homelessness, we as a community have not been able to truly solve homelessness in the Fox Cities. Until now.

Planning and Key Collaborations

Through funding from the Basic Needs Giving Partnership, United Way Fox Cities, Thrivent Financial Foundation, and the Community Foundation, the Housing Coalition secured the Amherst Wilder Foundation out of Minneapolis, Minnesota to assist with the creation of the survey instrument. Additionally, Wilder experts traveled to the Fox Cities to train the Project's volunteers to ensure accurate and valid data collection procedures. Lastly, the Wilder team compiled, evaluated, and identified significant trends within the data. Community Partners Research was also utilized to conduct a “supply” analysis of the current housing market in the Fox Cities.

Project RUSH collaborated with the Volunteer Center of East Central Wisconsin to assist with the management of volunteers through their Volunteer Spot on-line system. This allowed the project to effectively sign-up and coordinate the filling of volunteer slots for the project. The Volunteer Center provided their time to manage the volunteer system without charging the project.

Spectra Print provided an in-kind donation to assist with the printing and binding of over 700 28-page survey booklets. Lastly, Project RUSH hired a Project Manager to coordinate survey logistics and volunteer management, including coordinating the schedule, materials, volunteers, troubleshooting, and survey collection at all sites throughout the month of April.

Implementation: A Busy April

Over a 22 day period in April, Project RUSH conducted over 600 interviews with actively homeless or near homeless community members, with 125 volunteers donating over 700 hours of service to this project at 17 different community locations throughout the Fox Cities.

Impressions

From a volunteer perspective, Project RUSH empowered over 125 volunteers to get involved with our community's basic needs struggles in a direct and personal manner. With majority of the volunteers not directly involved with human service organizations, they had a unique opportunity to better understand the true dilemma of poverty in the Fox Cities.

"I often refer to the Fox Valley as Mayberry, but this experience opened my eyes to some of the problems we have just like any other city."

"There are many agencies doing great work in the valley and there are many services available, but for many near-homeless people they are only receiving, and perhaps eligible, for a few. So are there enough services for that group of people? I have had little previous exposure to those who are living in shelters so talking to [them] was educational for me."

"I was moved by the number of clients dealing with alcohol abuse. Many of them did not identify themselves as alcoholics but they had been in detox numerous times and continue to struggle with sobriety, especially when they have no stable place to live. I was also surprised when a former Warming Shelter occupant considered the Warming Shelter as stable housing. He is currently in an apartment and said, he would pay ANY amount, everything he could possibly earn, to keep that apartment. Housing is so important to the stability of all human beings and such a basic need."

From a participant perspective, Project RUSH provided an avenue to feel heard and to contribute to the solution, not just be "a part of the problem." One woman refused to accept the financial stipend at the end of the survey, insisting that being able to share her story and hopefully make a difference was the only reward she wanted. Another gentleman finished his survey and approached a steering committee member saying, "Whew. That felt great to get that off my chest. Thank you for letting me tell my story." Time after time, we heard from volunteers that participants thanked them for asking these questions and for being involved in such a wide-scale, thought out project to address the problems and/or challenges still existing in the community.

Next Steps

At the Fox Cities Housing Coalition's Annual Report to the Community on Wednesday, October 21, 2015, we will present the data results and areas of strategic focus resulting from Project RUSH.

Specifically, we will provide background on the project's development and implementation, highlight significant statistic results, and discuss the implications of the data findings as it relates to both agencies within the Housing Coalition as well as the community at large.

