

## Family PASS and Partners Call on Business Leaders to Help End Homelessness

Even one homeless person is one person too many, panel moderator Kathy Albarado (right), founder, President and CEO of Helios, HR, told an audience at Family PASS' June 28 panel discussion at the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce. She urged business leaders to focus on what they can do in the community to end homelessness. Ms. Albarado moderated a panel representing key elements of the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness.



## Fairfax County Looks to Partnership to Help the Homeless

Homelessness is something Fairfax County realized it couldn't solve alone, panelist Thomas Barnett, told the audience of business and community leaders



*1panelists from left, moderator Kathy Albarado, Tom Barnett, OPEH, Dani Colon, Shelter House, Abby Dunner, Cornerstones, Kathi Sheffel, Fairfax County Public Schools, and Sou-Yeon Han, Family PASS*

at the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce, speaking about how the county's Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH) and its coalition was founded eight years ago.

As homeless numbers spiked in Fairfax County – and across the country - those responsible for addressing homelessness saw there just was not enough affordable housing in the county to serve those in need. They realized they were managing -- but not solving -- the problem and they needed the integrated efforts of the nonprofit and business sectors – and they also recognized the need to include prevention – helping at risk families before they became homeless.

Barnett, who formed the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness, said that prevention is possible through mediation on behalf of those at risk of becoming homeless. Prevention makes sense and is more cost-effective. He said 30-50% of income of many low-wage workers in Fairfax currently goes towards rent. On any given week, he noted, these families, facing a second job loss, illness, or a broken car, can be on the verge of homelessness.

Affordable housing is the key, Barnett said, adding it is essential to preserve low income housing in the county. OPEH is now in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of its 10 Year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. While homeless numbers have decreased yearly, Barnett noted, there are still over 1000 homeless, most working families, and a shortage of affordable housing.

The panel agreed that, unfortunately, stigma and prejudice remain part of the public perception on homeless people. In 2015 OPEH launched the Mannequin series, hoping to attract attention to the stories behind the homeless people seen every day in Fairfax. Many people turned away from the mannequins, reinforcing the Partnership's view that prejudice remains.

Pat Kearns, Family PASS executive director, and other panelists told the audience that 66% of homeless are working homeless and 33% are children. These working homeless are the people who run area daycare centers, take care of senior citizens, and fill a host of other essential jobs that keep Fairfax County running. There are over 12,000 homeless in the greater DC area, with DC having the most homeless at 3,000 and Fairfax, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, second at 1059 out of seven surrounding counties.

Lack of affordable housing, a key factor in solving the problem of homelessness, led to the creation of the new Housing Opportunities Collaborative, a joint venture between Cornerstones, which provides housing and social services to the homeless, and OPEH to streamline recruitment of landlords, centralize housing location services, and train staff on housing. Abby Dunner, Housing Resource Coordinator for the Collaborative, said discussions to attract more housing includes a robust landlord incentive program.

### **How likely is this person to be killed?**

That's the question case managers ask when taking in victims of domestic violence at Shelter House. Shelter House uses a measurement of lethality to gauge how likely is it that this person will be killed if left in place, Danielle Colon, Director of Domestic Violence Services for Shelter House, said.

Domestic violence is the leading cause of homicides in the county and 40% of homeless in Fairfax are victims of domestic violence (DV). Shelter House runs the only 24-hour DV shelter in the county and has 42 beds. Shelter House has additional facilities housing the homeless, taking over shelters from the County in 2007.

*"Domestic violence doesn't scream," Ms. Colon said, "it whispers."* She recounted how she discovered that a classmate in her Social Work Master's Program was experiencing domestic violence. Even as a trained social worker, Ms. Colon said, she had no idea her colleague was in danger.

Ms. Colon said the business community can help get these families back on their feet by working with members of the Community Coalition and their case managers to recruit and hire the homeless.

### **There are 2315 homeless Students in Fairfax County Schools**

In addition to the county's annual *Point in Time* one night homeless count, Fairfax County Public Schools has its own method of estimating the number of homeless students, Kathi Sheffel, Homeless Liaison for the school system said. "We had 2315 homeless students this year, and a little over 800 of them were unaccompanied – meaning they had no parent with them," she said. They may be sleeping on a friend's couch or neighbor's floor. Her department's job is to identify which students are homeless and try to keep them in their base school.

This year 545 students were transported daily from their temporary homes to their school of origin, via volunteers and, in some cases, taxis. Ms. Sheffel and her colleagues coordinate with Coalition case managers when possible, although when the school year ends, the school system counts its homeless at zero and staff lose contact with the students. Each fall, FCPS starts the student homeless count anew.

During the school year, Ms. Sheffel's department supplies basic needs, arranges for tutoring, and works with the students to help them file college applications and financial aid packets. Of the 150 homeless seniors her department worked with in 2015-2016, 88 are going on to college. Once accepted, the

county coordinates with a college liaison who works with these students and their needs, understanding that many of these students do not even have a home to go to during semester breaks.

### **From Homelessness to Independence – the last steps to success**

Once a homeless family enters a shelter their stay is temporary, limited to about 30 days. Family PASS works with shelters and with the County's Coordinated Services Planning to enter families into the Family PASS program. That program, Senior Case Manager Sou-Yeon Han explained, focuses on first finding affordable housing and then assesses the barriers and strengths of a client over a period of months employing a widely-used measurement tool, the Self-Sufficiency Matrix. Family PASS recognized early on that education is what will give clients a foothold to earning a living wage. The Family PASS program concentrates its case management on education and job skills training which can take a year or more while at the same time supplying immediate needs that often include housing, child care and reliable transportation.

Ms. Han noted that the program is voluntary with success largely based on a client's commitment and determination. The 95% success rate Family PASS has achieved, based on when a client is housed and able to earn enough to cover monthly living expenses, is largely due to these clients and their commitment to succeed.

*(This program, sponsored by EAGLEBANK, was hosted and organized by Family PASS to inform and engage the business community in ending homelessness and to provide a snapshot of how the various members of the Community Partnership work in sync to end homelessness. The panelists, representing different aspects of the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness' work, talked about their organizations' roles, from the broader County's 10-Year Plan, to how homeless people enter the system, sheltered temporarily and finally how case managers work to house and provide the services needed that lead to having a home and financial self-sufficiency.)*