

First Ever Homeless Document Fair Makes Big Impact



(left) volunteers rally before the event (right) 100-Day team at the registration table

It was 8 a.m. on a cloudless May morning, and already the heat was beginning to build on the asphalt outside Chrysalis Center's Homestead Avenue headquarters. From the upper parking lot, a small army could be seen below assembling tables, erecting tents and carrying bunches of balloons to and fro. On the backs of their matching green t-shirts the word "volunteer" shone triumphantly, and on the front the day's big question stood, waiting eagerly to be answered: "Are You Document Ready?"

That's a question that many of our homeless neighbors have heard before in one form or another. In order to access most housing, clients must produce one or more identifying documents, such as a state issued photo I.D., birth certificate, Social Security card or disability verification. Unsurprisingly, after years on the streets and in shelters chronically homeless individuals are often missing one or all of these items. As an issue that frontline staff are all-too familiar with, it was decided early on during the 100-Day Campaign to Reduce Chronic Homelessness that document readiness needed to be addressed in a new way.

The 100-Day team knew that transportation to the DMV, local Social Security office or town clerk was an obstacle, especially with disabilities that make getting there on foot impossible. Receiving important forms via mail is also made difficult if you are sleeping under a bridge or moving from shelter to shelter. And devoting 30 dollars to replace a lost document is not an easy decision when you are hungry, or need to load your phone with valuable minutes. The solution was to bring all the necessary resources to a central location, offer transportation to and from that location and cover all costs associated with obtaining documents.

The Greater Hartford Coordinated Access Network rallied behind the 100-Day team, and spent two months helping to plan the event, which was held on May 8th. On this beautiful spring day representatives from CT Department of Motor Vehicles, the Social Security Administration, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Court Support Services Division Adult Probation, Charter Oak Health Center, CT Department of Correction, CT Department of Social Services, City of Hartford Town Clerk, CT Department of Public Health Vital Records, Community Health Network, Community Health Resources, Chrysalis Center and Veterans Affairs descended on Chrysalis Center to share resources and assist Hartford's most needy residents.

A shuttle transported groups of 15-20 from the South Green Park, a location central to residents of Open Hearth, South Park Inn, Immacare, and McKinney shelters. As they arrived, the individual or family was registered and then directed to the appropriate stations by the 100-day team.

All told, 47 applications for birth certificates were submitted, including 3 from out of state and 8 from Puerto Rico. The Social Security Administration provided 23 replacement Social Security Card applications, 2 benefit verifications, also offering updates on claims and instructions on applications. The Department of Motor Vehicles assisted 100 attendees in applying for new ID's, about 20 more were assisted with duplicate ID's and another 5 with renewals. Also very busy was the Department of Social Services who assisted with numerous budget sheets and benefit applications.



(left to right) Department of Health and Social Security Administration serving Hartford homeless residents

The tool known as the VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) is used statewide to prioritize clients for housing; 57 of these were completed that day, moving a large percentage of the attendees one step closer to a home. Another 30 Universal Housing Applications were also completed, this online system determines the applicant's eligibility for all of Greater Hartford's Housing programs and stores information in a central location.

By the end of the day close to 150 homeless residents were provided with information, assisted with applications or given assessments necessary for housing.

As a first-of-its-kind event, the document fair was a huge success. Never before had such a large number of state and local agencies been present to exclusively serve the homeless population. With a strong foundation laid, there are hopes to make the Document Fair an annual event, and a strong sentiment that next time we will make an even greater impact.