

Alternatives sought to end homelessness  
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Although there is always the possibility that anyone can become homeless, Martha Are, a homeless policy specialist for the NC Department of Health and Human Services, said that the people who are remaining on the streets are the ones with physical and/or mental disabilities.

Are was the guest presenter at a town hall meeting held by the Guilford County/High Point/Greensboro Task Force on Ending Homelessness at Westover Church on Sept. 12. She spoke to approximately 50 people about an approach currently taking place in cities across the country to combat homelessness.

Are explained that after a few years of many homeless shelters opening, people with disabling conditions—such as substance abuse problems or a physical handicap—take the majority of the homeless shelters' beds out of rotation. These individuals remain in shelters because they have great difficulty finding permanent housing and, consequently, increase a shelter's waiting list for other homeless people who need shelter.

According to Are, about 80 percent of the homeless who stay in temporary shelters leave the shelters after finding permanent housing in less than two months. Ten percent depart within six months. The other 10-15 percent who stay for over a year, consume about 50 percent of the shelters' funding.

Usually when the homeless stay in a shelter for over one year, Are said, "They're in the system."

For those who become reliant on homeless shelters, Are said that many communities across the nation have begun providing programs that provide the homeless with permanent housing outside of the shelters, accompanied by supportive services such as drug rehabilitation and employment assistance.

The Task Force reported that on Jan. 25, 2006, there were 1,108 homeless people in Guilford County. Of that number, 203 were identified as chronically homeless. Chronically homeless are people who have been on the streets for one year or more, or had four or more episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

Are explained that the chronically homeless often have a mental illness, substance abuse issues and/or physical disabilities that keep them from acquiring a job and a permanent residence, and pointed out that they should be the primary focus when trying to decrease the homelessness numbers.

Tuesday evening was the first major meeting by the Task Force whose goal is to drastically reduce homelessness by 2016. Seeking input from the community is an integral part of the Task Force's process.

"We need the input from people throughout Guilford County," said Carol Bruce, chair of the Task Force.

The group was created in February, which is convened by the mayors of Greensboro and High Point, and the chair of the County Board of Commissioners. The Task Force's panel consists of more than 30 government officials, faith-based organizations, social service groups, advocacy, law enforcement, businesses and people who have experienced homelessness.

"Ending homelessness in Greensboro, Guilford County and High Point can take place," said an optimistic Greensboro Mayor Keith Holiday.

The Task Force's ten-year plan is comprised of five steps. The implementation of the Task Force was the first step. The group then works on defining the homeless problem by collecting local data on homeless numbers and costs to assist the homeless. Subsequent to identifying specific problems, the group will evaluate alternatives to solve the crisis. After selecting alternative solutions and developing an action plan, the Task Force will implement their plan.

After Are's presentation, the audience separated into discussion groups to discuss Are's remarks and explore ways to reduce homelessness based on their personal experiences.

Erica Moore, who works for the Greensboro Housing Authority, was supportive of Are's idea on assisting the homeless.

"It's very important for all these homeless families to have supportive services," Moore said, even though many of the chronically homeless cannot acquire a home through the GHA because they have problems with substance abuse.

GHA promotes a drug free community and its regulations prohibit people with substance abuse problems from acquiring homes through the agency, Moore explained.

The GHA gives people with disabilities first priority on the waiting list, but does not have an emergency housing program. The department refers people in need of emergency housing to local agencies that provide such shelter and assistance.

Gail Haworth, the executive director of Servant House, said that the minimum wage has to increase to keep people away from homelessness.

Servant House is part of the Servant Center, located in Greensboro. Since 1991, Servant Center has participated in local, state and federal programs for the homeless—particularly with veterans.

Brenda Smith-Williams, who heads D.R.E.A.M.S. (Drug Rehabilitation Education Addiction and Mental health Solutions), also located in Greensboro, said that a critical solution to aid the chronically homeless is for more services to collaborate with each other.

“It’s got to be more marriages,” she said about services pooling resources.

Smith-Williams also suggested that data should be collected from actual homeless people and not solely on data from computers and books—even though she and others that evening agreed that many of the homeless might shy away from be questioned out of a general mistrust of unfamiliar people.

“They may very well tell you to go to hell,” she said.

The Task Force is scheduled to hold a second town hall meeting in High Point in the City Council Chamber on 211 S. Hamilton Rd.