

Guilford's homeless plan moves into action

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HIGH POINT — Leaders from throughout Guilford County gathered here Thursday to move forward on the county's Ten Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.

"There are more than 50 cities around our country who are now seeing the first reduction in homelessness in 25 years, a quarter century," said Philip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, who came to town to champion the importance of such plans.

"That's because you can take these plans, these ideas that are proven to have results, and bring them home and invest in them."

The root of Mangano's philosophy on homelessness — and the 10-year plan — is providing services to help the chronically homeless find places to live and stay off the streets.

The group putting the plan into action is called Partnering to End Chronic Homelessness in Guilford County. Its leadership council is composed of leaders from the cities of High Point and Greensboro, Guilford County, the Homeless Prevention Coalition of Guilford County and the Greensboro and High Point arms of the United Way. Civic and business leaders have thrown their support — and their money — behind the project. The United Way of Greater Greensboro and the Moses Cone-Wesley Long Community Health Foundation have given the project a two-year grant worth \$270,000.

Guilford County also has received a \$50,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro and a 26-month grant for \$644,000 from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services for a pilot project to create Housing Support Teams. That program, a partnership between Family Services of the Piedmont, Open Door Ministries and the Greensboro Housing Coalition, already has housed 40 chronically homeless people.

A cost benefit analysis for Guilford County is being prepared by the Jordan Institute of Chapel Hill to track the costs of program participants in the two years before and after their enrollment.

Greensboro Mayor Yvonne Johnson said she's confident the benefits to the community and taxpayers will be great.

"It reminds me of the proverb about teaching a man to fish being better than giving him a fish," Johnson said. "We can give the homeless what they need — real, permanent housing and the kind of help and programs they need to become stable — and it still costs \$30,000 less than what we're doing right now."

Mangano said that's because what American cities have done for the homeless for decades — the bare minimum — ends up being very expensive. He's been able to sell cities from New York to San Francisco on the 10-year plan's basic tenets by showing them that the true cost of homelessness to a city — from police and court costs to emergency room visits and drug treatment — is staggering and never-ending.

"There are compassionate, altruistic reasons to do this, and there are cold, hard business reasons to do this," Mangano said. "It's better for the community, it's better for the homeless who want a way to be self-sufficient, and it's better for the taxpayer. How often do you get a trifecta like that?"

High Point Mayor Becky Smothers said she liked what she heard from Mangano and feels good about the program.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that it costs less to deal with a problem if the problem eventually goes away," Smothers said.

"I'm optimistic that what we've done is set some realistic goals here. Ten years is a reasonable, realistic measurement to go after a problem we all want to see ended."

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