

HOMELESSNESS >



FLORIDA MAKES PROGRESS ON ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS



BY ROSE PHILLIPS

When it comes to helping people experiencing homelessness regain stable housing, federal policy and national best practices have changed considerably in recent years.

In Florida, although our homeless population often makes headlines for being among the nation's highest, our policies and programs for homeless assistance have evolved alongside those at the federal level.

State-level planning, coordination, data collection, and policy development is conducted by Office on Homelessness, a division created within the Department of Children and Families (DCF) by state legislation in 2001 (see Florida Statutes §420.622). Before then, Florida had some statutory language on the state definition of homelessness, the functions of local homeless coalitions recognized by DCF, and assistance programs for people who were experiencing or at risk of homelessness. However, the state's homeless assistance network was underdeveloped and fragmentary — state agencies did not coordinate on homeless policy,

many Continuums of Care were not applying for or winning federal CoC grants, and existing shelter beds served less than 1/3 of the homeless population.

The 2001 legislation sought to fill this vacuum. The new Office on Homelessness would be led by a Council on Homelessness, a 15-member board (later increased to 17) including representatives from relevant state departments and affiliated agencies, statewide nonprofits with an interest in homelessness, and governor's appointees. The Council's role is to develop policy recommendations and report to the governor on homelessness trends. Additionally, the legislation created two major new state funding programs for CoCs — the Challenge Grant and the Homeless Housing Assistance Grant.

The Challenge Grant funds a wide array of services in a CoC's plan, including prevention, outreach, emergency and transitional shelter, permanent housing, and supportive services, while Homeless Housing Assistance Grants

fund construction and rehabilitation of permanent and transitional housing. A \$5 million annual transfer from the Local Housing Trust Fund (which funds local State Housing Initiatives Partnership, or SHIP, programs) to DCF was authorized to help fund these new programs. Other changes in the 2001 legislation included discharge planning requirements to help medical, mental health, and substance abuse facilities avoid discharging patients into homelessness; identification of homeless persons as a high-priority population for housing funded by the State Apartment Incentive Loan (SAIL) program; and a requirement that local State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) programs include partnerships with advocates for the homeless, elderly, and migrant farmworkers.

Florida has made considerable progress on homeless service delivery since 2001. The number of Continuums of Care increased from 21 to 28 by 2009, and today the only counties not included in a Continuum of Care are Baker, Union, and Dixie. Every CoC has successfully applied for HUD funding, and the aggregate level of funding has increased 38% (from \$48.7 million to \$67.2 million). The number of beds for people experiencing homelessness increased by 74% between 2001 and 2012, with permanent

housing beds comprising the majority of the increase. The Council on Homelessness has disseminated best practices on institutional discharge planning, developed a framework to prevent youth aging out of foster care from becoming homeless, and provided guidance on alternatives to criminalizing problematic behaviors of people experiencing homelessness. The Florida Housing Finance Corporation (FHFC), in awarding SAIL funds, HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) funds from HUD, and federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LI-HTC or Housing Credits), has increasingly prioritized developments that serve people experiencing homelessness.

In the past few years, Florida’s homeless assistance system has experienced both losses and gains. In 2010, the State Legislature discontinued the practice of transferring funds from the Local Housing Trust Fund to DCF for homeless assistance, corresponding to sweeps of the State and Local Housing Trust Funds to fill budget deficits related to the recession. This change contributed to the Legislature’s defunding of the Homeless Housing Assistance Grant and Challenge Grants in 2012. However, in 2013, the Legislature approved two statutory changes that the Council on Homelessness had advocated for

HOMELESS POPULATIONS AND SUBPOPULATIONS IN FLORIDA:

HOMELESS POPULATION CATEGORY	POPULATION IN FLORIDA 2013	PERCENT CHANGE FLORIDA	PERCENT CHANGE UNITED STATES
Total Homeless Population (2007-2013)*	47,862	-0.4%	-9%
Persons in Families (2007-2013)	16,503	10%	-11%
Chronically Homeless Individuals (2007-2013)	7,778	4%	-25%
Veterans (2010-2013)**	5,505	-29%	-24%

*HUD uses 2007 as a baseline year for homeless population and subpopulation counts.

**2010 was the first year that HUD had reliable estimates of Veteran homelessness at the state level.

years: the state's Emergency Financial Assistance for Housing Program (EFAHP) was replaced with a more flexible Homelessness Prevention program, and Continuum of Care lead agencies were permitted to use up to 8% of their Challenge Grant awards (when available) for administrative costs.

The 2014 legislative session saw a revival of state support for homeless assistance. As discussed in this issue's Legislative Wrap-Up Article by Hendrickson and Ross (page 2), Senator Jack Latvala and Representative Kathleen Peters introduced companion bills to revive Challenge Grant funding and provide a basis for DCF to determine awards to CoCs. The bills also extended the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO)'s training and technical assistance program for affordable housing development (see F.S. §420.606) to CoCs, and required that Challenge Grant recipients include a coordinated assessment system in their CoC plans.

These resources could not come at a better time. In 2013, Florida's homeless population (as reported to HUD) was 47,862, a decrease of just 0.4% since 2007. By contrast, the national homeless population decreased by 9% during the same time period (see Table on previous page). This is

likely due to the severity of the recession in Florida — our homeless population reached a peak of 57,551 in 2010 and declined thereafter. Florida is on track to meeting the national goal of ending Veteran homelessness by 2015 — our veteran homeless population has decreased by 29% since 2010, compared to 24% at the national level. However, our chronic homeless population has increased slightly at the same time that the national chronic homeless population dropped by 25%. Similarly, homeless people in families increased by 10% in Florida, compared to an 11% decrease nationwide.

There is widespread hope that revived funding and new technical assistance programs can help Florida make up for lost ground in preventing and ending homelessness. In the meantime, if you are a mainstream affordable housing provider who wants to help people experiencing homelessness, or a homeless service provider who is considering becoming a developer of permanent housing, the Florida Housing Coalition can help you to move forward. We can explain how to use mainstream funding sources, such as SHIP, SAIL, and HOME, to help people who are experiencing homelessness move back into stable housing. [HNN](#)

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