

RoadHome Program Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

The Challenge:

- Rhode Island ranks 8th highest in the country for rental costs.
- Homelessness is at an all-time high throughout the state. In 2006, 6,900 men, women and children slept in a homeless shelter.
- 640 state-funded, project-based rental assistance units are reaching the end of their contract.
- The State's Housing First program has service dollars/capacity, but no housing for their clients.
- In total, 3,324 Rhode Island properties were noticed for foreclosure in the one-year period from June 2007 – May 2008.

These facts are exacerbated by a stagnant economy, lack of affordable housing options, deep cuts to social services and a growing state budget deficit. More and more, residents are feeling the squeeze from the high cost of living and lack of services available to offset the overwhelming need. Add to this the rising number of foreclosures throughout the state, and the result is more and more families being displaced and losing any sense of permanency in their lives. Local shelters have steadily witnessed new faces showing up at their doors following foreclosure of rental properties. Families are being caught off guard with little if any resources to get them back on track with the shelter and services they need.

Recent trends, and the growing number of individuals and families seeking shelter, illustrate the need for services and support that provide real solutions to the challenges homeless populations face. The problem has worsened to the point that if action is not taken now, more and more people will end up out on the street searching for a place to call home.

The Solution:

Recognizing that any solution needed to include an individualized approach to the problem the State HFA created the RoadHome program in 2007. RoadHome was designed to integrate housing and supportive services for populations who are homeless, or provide temporary cash assistance for those at risk of homelessness. The program is tenant based and has at its core, the belief that given appropriate support through community based services, permanent housing can be a reality for many who are currently struggling to find or sustain housing. Funded through the proceeds of the HFA operations and not encumbered by State or Federal regulations, the program is flexible enough to meet the unique needs of local homeless populations.

While the immediate goal is to have people spend less time in shelter, the program is designed to ensure that the housing includes the necessary support services for participants to gain the skills that will make permanent housing possible. Through increased employment and life skills training, appropriate medical and mental health services, and if appropriate, access to entitlement benefits, individuals and families will obtain the support they need to stabilize both their housing situations and their lives.

Program Details:

At the very core of the RoadHome program is the belief that if given the right supportive services, individuals and families can stabilize their lives and increasingly become more self sufficient. As part of the program, each participant must agree to develop a case management plan and work towards its implementation. Sustained permanent housing is the one goal that must be in each plan. Additional goals and benchmarks are individualized for each household, to not only reflect their existing circumstances, but their goals and aspirations as well.

- **Administration**

There are two major components to the administration of the housing program: Rental Subsidy/Unit Certification and Participant Intake.

- **Rental Subsidy**

To qualify for a unit for the program, landlords/owners must submit an application for certification of the unit. This application describes each unit's size, address and current rent (with or without utilities), criteria for tenancy, and if subsidies have been given to develop the project, an operating budget and disclosure of subsidies used. The application also requires a description of services that will be provided either by the owner or through a memorandum of understanding with a service agency. This description includes the staff to be used and a list of services that can be provided or accessed through the case managers.

A certification committee of HFA staff and external partners reviews the unit descriptions and related services and ultimately determines the rent at which the unit is certified. The rent limit is the high HOME rent. After a unit is certified, if an eligible participant meets the stated tenancy requirements, if there is a vacancy and if funds are available, the RoadHome rental subsidy can be utilized, with the HFA paying the difference between 30% of the participant's income or \$50, whichever is greater. Unit certification only qualifies the landlord to access RoadHome funds for the unit. The owner is not obligated to accept the RoadHome participant if other, qualified persons are on the waitlist, or the participant does not meet the tenancy criteria. This results in many more certified units than there are available dollars, but has created a greater pool encompassing a larger geographic area, of supportive housing choices for the homeless.

- **Participant Intake**

To enroll participants, four intake agencies were established throughout the State. These agencies responded to a competitive application process in which they described their current work with the homeless and their ability to implement the program. Rhode Island Housing began a comprehensive education and outreach effort to shelters throughout the State, encouraging homeless families and individuals to enroll in the program.

At Intake, eligible participants learn about the program and the intake case manager determines whether the housing program or the temporary cash assistance is the most appropriate response to their situation. If the housing program is the answer, the programs with certified units are reviewed and the eligible participant is assisted in receiving the appropriate applications.

- **Temporary Cash Assistance**

Temporary Cash Assistance provides security deposits and first month's rent to allow quicker placement out of shelter when sufficient income is in place. It also prevent homelessness by assisting with mediation and settlement dollars, security deposit or rent for those moving or facing eviction. To receive cash assistance, the participant must show they can sustain the housing for a minimum of six months.

- **Containing Costs**

With only \$1.5 million to start the program and with 67 persons enrolled before it began (to accommodate tenants whose project based units' contracts were expiring) the challenge was to make the most of what was given. The certification committee recognized two challenges: 1.) while subsidized housing would use few rental assistance dollars, vacancies were limited, and 2.) while private apartments were more readily available, keeping within the HOME limit would prove to be expensive.

Therefore the committee ensured that certification embraced both market and subsidized units to move people out of shelter quickly through private apartments and then move to a subsidized unit when the tenant is stable and able to assume a significant portion of the rent. Money is saved for services in that the cost of permanent

supportive housing, using existing community based services, is less expensive than institutional care and shelters. The majority of participants in the program leave the shelter for market rate apartments, stabilize their lives through supportive services and then move to a subsidized unit they can sustain without subsidy. In some cases, employment and stable relationships allow the family to stay in the private apartment.

- **Monitoring**

The program's success relies heavily on effective case management. In the certification process, service capacity is measured for those submitting their proposal. Only those agencies with strong partnerships in the social service system who have a proven track record of working with homeless populations are certified. Semi annual inspections of case files offer opportunities to review key benchmarks for the program: increased income, housing stability and progress with the case management plan. Each agency keeps the case management plan on file and tracks updates of progress for participants.

Tracking is also a part of the monthly requests for funding. Changes of income are tracked as are the length of stay of participants and where they live after they leave the program. Agencies with high turnover are monitored to determine the cause. Quarterly meetings with program case managers provide an opportunity to review issues and offer techniques to assist managers in their ability to be successful with clients. Participants can receive the subsidy as long as they continue to work on case management goals, pay the required rent and adhere to the program and lease requirements of the certified housing agency. Cash assistance is limited to \$1,200 annually with a three time lifetime cap.

Success to Date:

Since its inception in July 2007, the RoadHome program has:

- Provided assistance to 247 persons.
- Moved 106 households from shelter to permanent, supportive housing.
- Assisted 151 households to remain in housing through temporary cash assistance.
- Provided rental assistance for 69 chronically homeless individuals in the Housing First program, more than doubling their census.
- Had 10% of the participants leave the program, 13 of them for permanent housing they can sustain without subsidy.

In total, the program has helped over 247 to find their "road home." Specific success stories include:



The Gordils Family moved into their RoadHome apartment after being evicted from their home due to non-payment of rent. With the RoadHome rental assistance there were able to move into a 2-bedroom apartment and can now both feed their children and pay their rent. With the services they receive they are now acquiring the necessary skills to prevent a return to the circumstances of their eviction: financial literacy classes, mental health counseling, life skills development and job training. Their children can be in the same school for a full school year and benefit from the stable environment their parents can now provide for them.

Kim, a mother of two who entered RoadHome through a shelter. Now in her apartment she is pursuing her goal to be a registered nurse.

Robin had been homeless for years. Having a stable home and services through RoadHome has given her the support to find a job in the fast food industry.