

NCSHA 2011 ENTRY

HFA: Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA)
Category: Special Housing Needs-Combating Homelessness
Housing the Homeless: Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP)

Background: In 2006, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), in conjunction with Michigan Departments of Human Services, Corrections, Community Health, Education and other key partners, collaborated to develop a statewide 10-Year plan to end homelessness. Concurrently, MSHDA asked each Continuum of Care (CoC) body (a consortium of local partners representing all 83 Michigan counties) to develop a communitywide 10-Year plan. As a result, the state of Michigan has an overarching statewide plan that provides programs and funding to enable, support, and strengthen the CoC body's local plan to end homelessness. Hence was born Michigan's Campaign to End Homelessness. The all-encompassing concept for Michigan's Campaign is the "housing first" philosophy. "**Housing first**" or rapid re-housing as it is also known, is an alternative to the traditional system of emergency shelter or transitional housing which typically results in longer periods of homelessness.

Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP): The state of Michigan's 10-Year Plan has over 40 initiatives (see attached) to end homelessness that are available throughout the state. One of these initiatives is known as HARP. This program requires that as MSHDA Section 8 vouchers become available through attrition, they be made available to homeless individuals or families, **i.e. a homeless preference for Section 8 vouchers.**

Out of MSHDA's portfolio of approximately 25,500 vouchers, 7,124 are currently being used to house those previously living among the homeless. The HARP voucher stabilizes the household and analysis of the program proves that *less than 10 percent of households serviced with a HARP voucher relapse into homelessness.*

The HARP is **easily replicable:** The HARP requires each CoC body to have a HARP lead agency. The agency completes and signs a Coordinated Action Plan that outlines the duties the HARP lead agency will undertake. These duties include: verifying homelessness, assisting the applicant in completing and submitting an application for the Section 8 housing voucher program, and assisting with a minimum of three months of case management when the household receives the voucher and is placed into a housing unit. Three months of case management insures the household stabilize and integrates into the community.

In addition, the HARP lead agency assists the household in obtaining personal identification and income sources so that their paperwork is in order when a housing voucher becomes available. The agency also assists the household with locating furniture and linens for the housing unit if needed.

It is important to note here that the HARP lead agency is not paid by MSHDA for their services, nor for certifying homelessness, referring households to the Section 8 voucher waiting list or the short-term case management. Through the Campaign to End Homelessness in Michigan, the CoC and HARP lead agency are committed to ending homelessness and view the HARP

program as a tool made available by MSHDA that assists them with homeless clients that *they are already working* with to obtain a voucher and stabilize their housing situations.

HARP responds to an important state housing need. As noted previously, MSHDA currently has 7,124 active HARP vouchers, representing 7,124 Michigan families that would be homeless without this program. By instituting the Campaign to End Homelessness in Michigan and creating the HARP option, MSHDA has kept the number of homeless from rising in a state greatly affected by severe economic challenges. For example, the city of Detroit in Wayne County, where shelters are at capacity, currently has approximately 2,500 active MSHDA HARP vouchers, admirably assisting the homeless population in a city with the highest poverty rate in the country.

As Michigan's Housing Finance Agency, MSHDA's preference of Section 8 vouchers to the homeless through the HARP program targeted this finite, valuable resource **to Michigan customers** that are most vulnerable and most in need. Homeless people on the streets or in shelters often require the long-term stability offered by a voucher. Studies have proven that vouchers assist in quickly stabilizing people with chronic mental illness, those with mental illness and substance abuse issues, and families living in extreme poverty.

MSHDA initially piloted the HARP program in 2003 by targeting four counties. Through this pilot, MSHDA learned that homeless people housed through HARP had a **proven track record of remaining housed**. Therefore, in 2007, MSHDA implemented HARP in all 83 counties in Michigan. Current data shows that 90 percent of households served with a HARP voucher remain housed in the same unit at their 12-month lease renewal date; this is only 1 percent lower than households who were not homeless prior to receiving a housing voucher.

The track record of HARP is noteworthy because it proves that if an agency in the community acts as a conduit, assisting those most in need with identification and the paperwork necessary to obtain a voucher, then links the household to this valuable resource, homeless people can and do stabilize quickly and remain housed at a rate closely equal to households not homeless prior to receiving a housing voucher.

Many studies have been done on the cost of homelessness. By providing a preference for current homeless people, MSHDA is assisting consumers that are high end users of government sponsored shelter bed nights, motel bed nights, and hospital emergency rooms. The monthly cost of providing rental assistance to people that cycle in and out of homelessness is **far less expensive** than the daily per diem spent on shelters, motels and hospital emergency room visits.

As described earlier, the HARP lead agency guides those most in need of housing and assists them in obtaining a voucher. That guidance, along with the case management received after the voucher is provided, has proven to be **an effective use** of a scarce yet highly effective resource, a housing voucher. Chronically homeless individuals are finally housed and stable. Families that have cycled in and out of homelessness are stably housed, and since the average age of homelessness in Michigan is 6 and a half years old, MSHDA's HARP option is rapidly providing housing to school age children, making it easier for these children to achieve success in the classroom.

The HARP lead agency forms **a partnership** with the MSHDA housing agent (contracted by MSHDA) who administers the vouchers. Through continuous communication the lead agency and housing agent work together to: 1) place homeless households on the waiting list, 2) be sure their personal identification and other applicable paperwork is available to enable the household to meet the guidelines of the Section 8 voucher program, 3) to locate housing that meets Housing Quality Standards (HQS) and lead based paint criteria, 4) and to assist the household to integrate successfully into the community, increasing nearly a hundredfold the chances of remaining housed.

HARP requires MSHDA staff to attend CoC meetings, to be up-to-date on the Campaign to End Homelessness, and to work closely with the HARP lead agency.

Through the Campaign to End Homelessness in Michigan, many positive partnerships and strong relationships have developed. For example, HARP lead agencies and MSHDA housing agents attend Project Homeless Connect events to help the homeless in completing HARP applications. In addition, MSHDA housing agents work with MSHDA on many other aspects of the Campaign as well.

HARP is both unique and creative in that it provides a straight path to housing the homeless – Housing First. It offers long-term housing assistance to individuals and families that have cycled in and out of homelessness, and the on-going case management prevents re-lapsing into homelessness.

It is important to note here that MSHDA also provides rental assistance to those living in poverty through Emergency Shelter Grants (ESG), Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA), and other programs for low-income people. MSHDA recognizes the needs of those that fall behind on their rent and are living in poverty through other programs as well.

In summary, based on the success of the HARP model, MSHDA encourages other Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) and Housing Finance Agencies to target their vouchers to people living in homelessness. Use of this model provides housing for those most in need, the homeless, and it reduces the cost of shelter bed nights, motel use and other associated costs. The voucher provides long-term housing stability for the most vulnerable people in our society..

HARP achieves measurable results, it reduces the costs of homelessness, it is extremely effective, it strategically assists in the Campaign to End Homelessness in Michigan, and most importantly, it provides Michigan's poorest citizens with a place to call home.

