

Rockford, Illinois: Ending and Sustaining an End to Chronic Homelessness



Rockford, Illinois reached functional zero, effectively ending chronic homelessness in January 2017.

TOP 7 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ROCKFORD:

1. Have the right leadership in place to bring urgency and attention to the effort
2. Take tangible action toward a shared aim, with a day-to-day driver at the wheel
3. Publicly commit to ending chronic homelessness
4. Build off of the collective impact processes and players from veteran homelessness
5. Use media to humanize the chronically homeless
6. Engage landlords in reporting any issues with chronic placements to support stable housing
7. Have a regular public forum in which to hold stakeholders accountable

COMMITTING TO ENDING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Rockford was the first city in the country in the Zero 2016 Campaign to end veteran homelessness. The lessons learned in achieving that milestone propelled the City into being able to tackle chronic homelessness.

In addition to the city's Community Action staff, which serves as the city's social services agency and Continuum of Care providers, the following Rockford stakeholders were key to achieving an end to chronic homelessness:

- **The Mayor.** The Mayor became engaged in ending veteran homelessness and even engaged in some street outreach! After getting to know some of the homeless veterans that were part of the Zero 2016 initiative, he used his voice to change the community's perception of the homeless, including the chronically homeless. As of January 2017, there is a new mayor who is still getting familiar with these initiatives but continues to fully support efforts. The current Mayor continues to ask for and review monthly updates on sustaining an end to chronic homelessness and other homeless initiatives.
- **Fire Department.** The Emergency Medical Services (EMS) has been especially critical to ending chronic homelessness, since they frequently have a medical/ambulance history. EMS was a critical partner in finding and connecting the chronically homeless to Coordinated Entry.
- **Police Departments.** The park police as well as city police serve a similar role in helping the chronically homeless by connecting them to coordinated entry, often choosing to bring them to Coordinated Entry instead of arresting them for minor crimes.
- **Emergency Shelters.** Some of the chronically homeless had been in the shelter system a long time and had become comfortable there. With the emphasis on ending chronic homelessness, the shelters encouraged them to work toward permanent housing.
- **Mental Health/Substance Abuse and Healthcare for the Homeless.** Between these agencies the community was able to provide services to most of the chronically homeless. Due to the provision of these services, the Continuum was able to place persons in Shelter Plus Care and other supportive housing.

- **Outreach.** Having dedicated and experienced outreach staff was perhaps the most important intervention for ending chronic homelessness.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While striving to reach functional zero, Rockford encountered several obstacles:

- **Finding housing for chronically homeless persons with addiction issues.** Successfully identifying and communicating with landlords who would be willing to house these clients proved helpful. The stakeholders ensured to landlords and public housing agencies (PHAs) that they would offer supportive services to clients, including some low-intensity follow-up case management. Providers will continue to offer these services to help ensure continued stability.
- **Building trust with persons who had lived on the streets for long periods of time.** To gain their trust, outreach workers spent a lot of time getting to know them and made multiple attempts to gain their trust and respect. Once trust was gained, homeless persons often approached the outreach workers and providers asked "how do I get housed?"
- **Many staff in homeless and mainstream agencies did not initially want chronically homeless persons in their offices.** The Continuum leaders worked with reticent organizations and persuaded them to serve first those who need housing the most.
- **Another challenge was that many chronically homeless, even when housed, needed help with transportation to doctor's appointments, shopping, etc.** The Community Action Agency uses Community Services Block Grant funds to help fund transportation for clients.

WHAT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

To keep a constant community focus on the goal to end chronic homelessness, the Mayor required the city lead to regularly provide updates in a community forum called Rockstat. All City departments are required to present on their particular activities once a quarter, but the Mayor required that the Chronic initiative be on the agenda every month.

As for **specific policies implemented** to help achieve functional zero:

- The stakeholders instituted a housing preference for chronically homeless persons. CoC PSH resources were targeted for all chronically homeless persons with rapid rehousing being used where no appropriate PSH was immediately available.
- One of the PHAs in the area gave preference for homelessness and a second PHA has agreed to provide Housing Choice Vouchers to formerly chronically homeless persons who no longer need the services associated with PSH.
- The Continuum has embraced the targeting of the chronically homeless in the annual CoC NOFA application process.

There were also **structural/systemic changes** that made a difference:

- The VA continued to conduct outreach and support the effort to end chronic homelessness beyond the successful initiative to end veteran homelessness.
- There was a definitive increase in landlord-tenant mediation services.
- Outreach increased and became more coordinated. For instance, PATH outreach workers, who search for mentally ill homeless persons, upon finding a chronically homeless person, bring them to the Community Action Agency for assessment.
- Funding streams were realigned to prioritize the chronically homeless. For example, the local ESG Rapid Rehousing

funding was used for the chronically homeless when PSH was not immediately available. And the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) funding was also directed towards supporting the ESG match to support the chronically homeless initiative.

MID-COURSE IMPROVEMENTS

There was one major needed adjustment to stay on course:

- We changed outreach strategies mid-course from being passive to becoming relentless in street outreach, offering more than just housing as an enticement to engage with us. Some strategies included hotel stays to "remind" the chronically homeless of what it feels like to be housed, to receive perks, like food and coffee, and to use unusual but available resources such as TV news anchors and other non-outreach staff to engage in outreach.

AFTER ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

The community achieved functional zero on January 30, 2017. Today, Rockford houses the chronically homeless in fewer than 30 days. Rockford doesn't use other metrics to track sustainability, finding the functional zero definition and the average time to house a chronically homeless person as sufficient. To keep its focus on functional zero, the local team is:

- Holding case conferencing monthly.
- Keeping the by-name list (BNL) current. Aside from monthly meetings, members still report new chronically homeless persons as they are found and these names are added to the BNL. Searches are also done in HMIS to find homeless persons who become chronically homeless.
- Continuing to report to the Mayor monthly.
- Pursuing active communication among stakeholders as issues arise.
- Messaging that sustainability does not rest on any one person but on all stakeholders.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST THREATS TO SUSTAINING FUNCTIONAL ZERO?

- Ongoing socialization. Despite being housed some still struggle with continuing to live as though they are still homeless. Rockford is still seeking more ways to socialize and broaden their support networks.

WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO HAVE KNOWN EARLIER?

- That the chronically homeless would be a bigger challenge to house and to stabilize than homeless veterans.

HOW HAVE EFFORTS ON CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS IMPACTED YOUR WORK?

- Provided hope and confidence that Rockford can make progress on solving all homelessness. Rockford has set goals for ending youth and then all remaining homelessness.
- Homeless clients in Rockford are more willing to reach out for help because they see the commitment from providers to solve homelessness.
- The largest shelter in Rockford now reports significant openings. Having that validation that homelessness can be reduced inspires us to make shelter stays of short duration (less than 30 days) for all.

- Reaching these goals gave the Rockford partners the confidence, grounding and expertise needed to be invited to present at local and national conferences to advise other leaders on proven ways to end homelessness.