

Community Spotlight: Homelessness Prevention Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO) Project

Rural Homelessness Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO)

This two-year pilot project focused on homelessness prevention, regional coordination and planning to end homelessness in 17 rural counties of Southeast and Central Ohio. Results indicated that communities vary in their ability to plan and implement homelessness prevention. Issues found in RHISCO mirror national homelessness issues, with improved point in time counts and mainstream involvement in planning serving as key elements in successful efforts to end homelessness.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO) was a two-year project designed to end homelessness, foster regional coordination and develop a regional plan to end homelessness in 17 rural counties of Southeast and Central Ohio. RHISCO, which began in 2005, was created in collaboration with the National Alliance to End Homelessness (The Alliance), the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations (The Foundations) and leaders of the 17 counties.

The Project originated from two national movements started in 2000:

- 1) Development of a new approach to solving homelessness, and
- 2) A growing trend toward philanthropy to help solve the nation's most pressing social issues.

The Foundations analyzed their service area and discovered that homelessness and a lack of resources to address homelessness were major issues impacting its residents. As a result, they partnered with The Alliance in resolving homelessness in the 17 rural counties of Southeast and Central Ohio that it serves. RHISCO was implemented in five phases that involve assessment, summits, planning, implementation and evaluation, and knowledge-building and dissemination. Results indicated that communities vary in their ability to plan and implement homelessness prevention. Issues found in RHISCO mirror national homelessness issues, and improving point in time counts and mainstream involvement in planning are successful ways of ending homelessness.

CHALLENGE

Homelessness, mainly associated with urban areas, is often researched in the context of urban homelessness. However, rural homelessness also occurs and very little research has been done to reveal the unique characteristics and needs of persons experiencing homelessness in rural areas. Common impediments to additional research on rural homelessness center on arguments that rural homelessness is not prevalent enough, there is a lack of community resources to address rural homelessness and models developed for larger communities may not work for smaller, rural ones. In an effort to shed light on rural homelessness, the Alliance and the Foundations created RHISCO.

Of the 17 rural counties included in RHISCO, nine counties were located in Appalachia and qualified for distressed county status based on their low per-capita income and high rates of poverty and unemployment. Populations in the counties varied from 15,000 residents to 130,000 residents and combined, they represented approximately 20% of the population of Ohio. None of the counties had

farm-dependent economies and rates of high school and post-secondary education fell well below the state average.

SOLUTION

The purpose of RHISCO was to improve the health and quality of life of individuals and families experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness through comprehensive, and coordinated planning and implementation. To accomplish this task, RHISCO had three separate goals: 1) to help develop local plans to end homelessness, 2) to foster regional coordination in ending homelessness, and 3) to develop a regional plan to end homelessness. The Foundations provided funding for each goal, while the Alliance provided technical assistance and consulting services to county leaders, who actually implemented the process.

IMPLEMENTATION

An agreement signed by the Foundations, the Alliance and leaders of the 17 counties described the overarching goals of RHISCO and the role that each organization played in it. Once the Alliance successfully recruited and engaged stakeholders of each county in the project, it was agreed upon that RHISCO would be implemented in the following five-phase process:

Phase 1: Assessment – The Alliance assessed and collected data on characteristics of homelessness in each county. To assess sites, Alliance staff conducted site visits and interviews with service providers in each participating county to gather information on the prevalence and characteristics of persons experiencing homelessness in their area. Alliance staff also made sure to get feedback on challenges each county faced in ending homelessness and practices/plans currently in place to address them.

Phase 2: Summits – Three summits took place over a two-year period for stakeholders from selected service providers and representatives from the 17 counties to meet, network and collaborate, if necessary.

Phase 3: Planning – Counties developed ten year plans to end homelessness with the assistance of Alliance staff and consultants.

Phase 4: Implementation – The counties implemented priorities highlighted in their ten year plans. Alliance staff provided technical assistance to assist implementation.

Phase 5: Evaluation, Knowledge Building and Dissemination – Alliance staff evaluated RHISCO and provided the stakeholders with information on outcomes and lessons learned.

RESULTS

Key findings from RHISCO can be explained in terms of cross-cutting findings about capacity and promising practices found in the counties' ten year plans. Cross-cutting findings indicated that homelessness was a serious concern for all participating counties, communities varied in their ability to plan and implement RHISCO, regional themes were created from county planning, issues found in RHISCO mirrored national homelessness issues, and many people needed stable permanent housing. Even after RHISCO ended and despite the challenges each county faced, communities remained committed to ending homelessness.

The following promising practices, adopted from model communities successful in reducing homelessness, were incorporated into RHISCO county plans: improve point in time counts, involve mainstream service providers in planning, coordinate with other organizations and people, improve access to information, promote effective homelessness prevention efforts, and promote intraregional collaboration. The hope is that using these promising practices will end homelessness in RHISCO counties.

INSIGHTS/LESSONS LEARNED

Like most other projects, RHISCO was presented with a set of challenges throughout its planning and implementation stages. Such challenges included: 1) tackling the local misconceptions and moral judgment about homelessness, 2) ensuring that counties collected accurate point-in-time counts and participated in HMIS, 3) the limited amount of time and resources of community stakeholders, and 4) the lack of affordable housing. Some challenges were resolved, while others simply required more time, planning or funding. In the end, RHISCO made a significant impact on ending homelessness in rural areas and may serve as a model for other rural communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Jonda Clemings
Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Ohio
614-280-1984
jondaclemings@cohhio.org