



Five-Year Strategic Plan to Prevent, Reduce,
and End Homelessness in Berks County

2014 – 2018



Leadership

Coalition Members

- Abilities in Motion
- Berks Community Action Program (BCAP)
- Berks Connections/Pretrial Services
- Berks Counseling Center
- Berks County Assistance Office
- Berks County Children and Youth
- Berks County Community Development
- Berks County District Attorney's Office
- Berks County Housing Authority
- Berks County Intermediate Unit
- Berks County MH/DD Program
- Berks County Area Agency on Aging
- Berks Women in Crisis
- BerksTALKLINE
- Bridge of Hope
- Catholic Charities
- City of Reading Community Development
- Co-County Wellness Services/Berks AIDS Network
- Community Alliance & Reinvestment Endeavor, Inc.
- Council on Chemical Abuse
- Easy Does It, Inc.
- Family Promise of Berks County
- Friend, Inc. Community Services
- Greater Berks Food Bank
- Greater Reading Mental Health Alliance
- Habitat for Humanity of Berks County
- Hope Rescue Mission
- Immanuel United Church of Christ
- Jewish Federation
- JusticeWorks YouthCare, Inc.
- Life's Choices
- Mary's Shelter
- MidPenn Legal
- NAMI Berks County
- Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Berks
- New Person Ministries
- Opportunity House
- Reading Berks Conference of Churches
- Reading Hospital - ACT Program
- Reading Housing Authority
- Service Access & Management (SAM)
- St. Elizabeth's Kitchen
- TASC
- Tree of Life Services
- The Salvation Army
- Threshold
- United Community Services
- United Way of Berks County
- YMCA of Reading and Berks County

Staff Members

Executive Director Sharon W. Parker

Outreach Case Manager Ariane Cooney

Case Manager Stefanie Ferrara

Board of Directors

Executive Committee

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Vice-Chair George J. Vogel, Jr.

Council on Chemical Abuse

Treasurer Carol M. Bailey, **Berks Counseling Center, Inc.**

Secretary Mindy McCormick, **The Salvation Army**

Past Chair Emeritus Dave Reyher, **Educator**

Ken Pick **County of Berks**

Jay Worrall **Alvernia University**

Patricia Giles **United Way of Berks County**

Sheila Bressler **County of Berks, MH/DD**

Carolyn Bazik **Co-County Wellness Services**

Stacey Keppen **Reading Housing Authority**

Stephanie Quigley **Abilities in Motion**

Thor Vasquez **BCAP Budget Counseling Center**

Lorena Keely **Service Access & Management**

Michael Kaucher **Reading Berks Conference of Churches**

Ken Borkey **YMCA of Reading and Berks**

Bishop Robert Brookins **Community Alliance & Reinvestment Endeavor, Inc.**

Mary Kay Bernosky **Berks Women in Crisis**

Jerry Cox **Formerly Homeless Representative**

Rob Turchi **Hope Rescue Mission**

Maria Vazquez **MidPenn Legal**

Gwen Didden **Family Promise of Berks**

Yvonne Stroman **Easy Does It, Inc.**

Lenin Agudo **City of Reading**

Service-Learning Partnership

Robin Carter **Alvernia University, MALS Program**

Berks Coalition to End Homelessness is a group of representatives of community & government agencies, as well as concerned citizens whose goal it is to follow this Five-Year Strategic Plan to Prevent, Reduce and End Homelessness in Berks County.

Active Committees

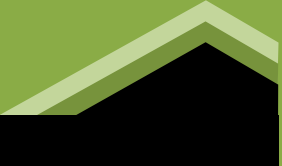
Planning

Education

Youth

Social Services

Permanent Housing



Five-Year Strategic Plan to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness in Berks County

The Coalition is a public and private partnership that **prevents, reduces, and ends homelessness**. Collaborating with community partners in delivering housing, social services, and support services creates a more sustainable future for Berks County.

focus

Preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness is a complex problem that requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach. After all, what is the benefit of keeping people from losing their homes if jobs do not exist that can provide a sustainable, living wage? What benefit is there to Berks County residents if social services provide rental assistance and mediates with landlords if the following month the same financial situation exists?

This Five-Year Strategic Plan requires a commitment from government officials, philanthropic organizations, faith-based organizations, civic groups, businesses, housing/service providers, and concerned citizens.

This commitment includes:

- **assessing** the current situation and performing ongoing evaluation and monitoring of services and programs,
- **securing** current and future funding,
- **redirecting** resources as needed, and
- **identifying** what is most effective.

As a Coalition there is an agreement to:

- prevent and end homelessness.
- continue to support the current structure of collaboration and cooperation through BCEH.
- focus resources, most especially new ones, toward prevention and intervention.
- prioritize a rapid re-housing model for those previously stable families experiencing non-chronic homelessness.
- reduce length of stay in emergency shelters within days by providing increased availability of decent, safe, affordable, service-enriched housing options.
- strive to create a more sustainable, synthesized system of services for all vulnerable populations within Berks County.
- maintain the commitment to follow through with this Plan and analyze the effectiveness of services and funding allocated bi-annually.
- establish clear measuring systems and monitor results regularly - focusing on prevention outcomes.



executive summary

The Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Inc. (BCEH) has developed an extensive multi-sector process in order to create a Plan to end homelessness. Homelessness in Berks County is the result of a wide variety of factors. Some individuals are homeless due to financial circumstances. Others are chronically homeless as a result of substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health issues. To address the problem of homelessness, BCEH was formed in 1995. BCEH helps to develop and implement services working with public and private sectors toward ending homelessness. Additionally, BCEH maintains and provides data to support research necessary to make informed policy decisions connected with prevention. Currently, BCEH provides a significant voice in preventing, reducing and ending homelessness in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

Beginning in 2012, the BCEH Planning Committee initiated a process to identify the needs, strategies, goals, and action steps necessary to address homelessness. The goals established by the Coalition were: to reduce homelessness overall, reduce family and youth homelessness, reduce length of stay in emergency shelter, and reduce recidivism. A Point-In-Time [PIT] Count in January 2013 demonstrated that there were 468 homeless persons in shelters, transitional housing or unsheltered. Women and children make up nearly half of the homeless population in Berks County.

Since the founding of our country, “home” has been the center of the American dream. Stable housing is the foundation upon which everything else in a family’s or individual’s life is built-without a safe, affordable place to live, it is much tougher to maintain good health, get a good education or reach your full potential.

Shaun Donovan,
United States
Secretary of Housing
and Urban
Development (HUD)



This Plan identifies BCEH's vision, mission, goals, and strategies. Despite reductions in funding, preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness in Berks County must continue to be a top priority and this Plan demonstrates that conviction. BCEH echoes President Obama when he states: "it is simply unacceptable for individuals, children, families, and our nation's Veterans to be faced with homelessness."

Homeless prevention strategies will have the greatest chance of success if they are a part of a community-wide effort within a long-term approach supported by strong leadership, adequate resources, and public and private commitments. This Plan is a joint effort by the BCEH, City and County Officials, private and public partners, and members of religious communities. Our aim is high – we are focused on a future where no one is turned away, and conditions are such that everyone who desires to have a home shall have one.

Sharon W. Parker, Executive Director

Modesto D. Fiume, Chair

George J. Vogel, Jr. Vice-Chair

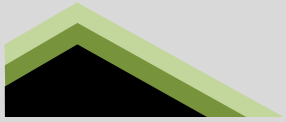
Carol Bailey, Treasurer

Mindy McCormick, Secretary



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“...HUD measures success in a family moving to permanent housing. But success to the Coalition means more than that. As we are a collaborative of agencies and individuals, success means that all the pistons are firing, we are sharing information, we are sharing resources, we are filling niches, we are working together to make the most out of the limited funding available. That we are getting the word out – that people know who to call and have a place to go for help.

Sharon W. Parker
Executive Director, BCEH

introduction

Defining Homelessness

On January 4, 2012, The Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] issued final regulations into effect that defined homelessness as including four broad categories:

- 1] People who are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided if they were in shelter or a place not meant for human habitation.
- 2] People who are losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled up situation, within 14 days and lack resources or support networks to remain in housing.
- 3] Families with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state.
- 4] People who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening situations related to violence; have no other residence; and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Purpose of Plan

While the purpose of this Plan is to implement strategies that will enhance prevention methods, the overall purpose is to promote self-sufficiency within Berks County. BCEH continues to strengthen and expand relationships with agencies outside the homeless provider network.

Focus of Plan

BCEH has been focusing on homeless prevention for several years. At the federal level, HUD has mandated that this mission be accomplished locally. Developing a Plan that can shift from intervention towards prevention is the primary focus. In an effort to identify methods to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness, this Plan examines the following:

- Identifies target areas of focus in an effort to prevent homelessness and document strategic effectiveness.
- Allows opportunities to evolve and edit the Plan as needed.
- Continually review, monitor, and evaluate data and use of data.



key principles

Values

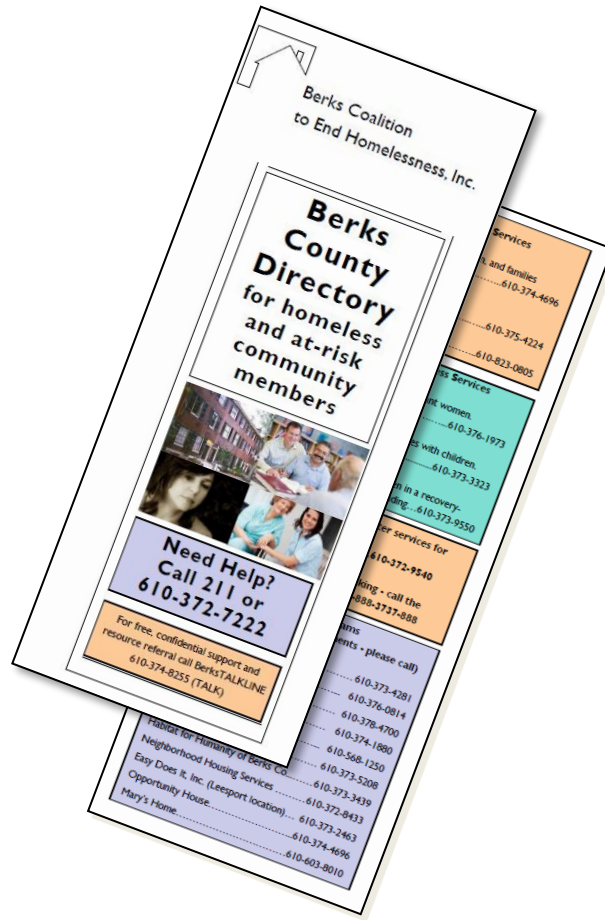
Partnership The Berks Coalition to End Homelessness accomplishes their mission with many other partners within community.

Access Community members in need have immediate access to BCEH services during traditional business hours as well as outside of normal business hours.

Performance BCEH sponsored programs and services are results oriented and focused on the long term - preventing homelessness rather than reacting to crisis situations. However, when crisis situations arise BCEH will meet the need with emergency shelter, transitional housing, and needed services.

Accountability BCEH programs and services are evaluated by how well they prevent, reduce, and end homelessness within Berks County. This process includes the following:

- 1] data measurement on a regular basis,
- 2] fulfillment of federal policies and mandates, and
- 3] increased, positive community awareness.

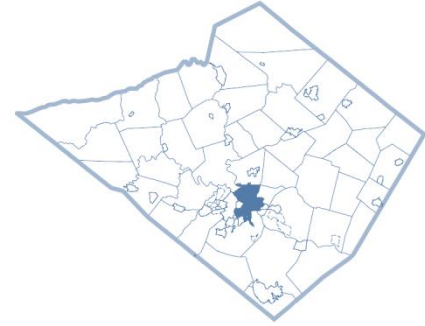


Community Vision

That individuals and families no longer need to be faced with helpless and homeless conditions – and that safety and shelter become a daily part of every person’s life.

Our Mission

The Coalition is a public and private partnership that prevents, reduces, and ends homelessness through comprehensive coordination of innovative solutions and quality programs.



background

Homelessness Locally

Berks County has made tremendous strides in the last 30 years towards ending homelessness. However, despite such efforts, homelessness continues to increase as a result of increased poverty, job loss, economic hardship, addictions, or release from institutional facilities. Additionally, public understanding of homelessness has also changed. No longer is it the stigma it once was as many residents may now know someone who experienced a period of homelessness or was at risk.

In 1995, BCEH began with only approximately a dozen members, most of whom represented the organizations that sheltered homeless people. About this time, HUD announced that funding from the Supportive Housing Program [SHP] would only be granted to those communities that demonstrated a continuum of service to move people from homelessness to independent living. This required that local SHP recipients work together to identify gaps and impediments in the services system that prevented persons who were homeless from gaining economic independence. In 1997, the Coalition took on this function.

BCEH gained strength when members adopted a new direction. In 2004, the agenda of the Coalition moved from addressing the immediate needs of homelessness to understanding the root causes and ending homelessness. In 2008, The Berks Homeless Coalition took a new direction and was incorporated as the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Inc. [BCEH]. This renewed commitment reflects the mission statement which calls for an end to homelessness. In order for the Coalition to make a complete shift and *see the larger system* as to why homelessness still exists within Berks County – **a thorough examination of the local social and cultural issues that can trigger homelessness are needed.**

In Berks County, moving people from temporary shelters into permanent, safe, & affordable housing, is difficult because of behavioral and physical health issues as well as the lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing options.



The Continuum of Care

Berks County has a well developed Continuum of Care [CoC] system. This system is best explained through the HUD model [See Figure 1] and contains the array of services needed to support persons who are homeless. The activities of the Coalition have moved beyond this model to work on the root causes of homelessness as explained in the “Strategies” Section of this Plan.

In many communities across the country, there exists a linear model where people experiencing homelessness are expected to progress through the four levels of care. But the reality is much more complicated, as seen in Figure 2 – created by BCEH. No longer do we automatically place people in Emergency Shelter first. Because of the change in the way the system works, BCEH must change with the times. Clients, especially families experiencing sudden homelessness after a previously stable history, can be placed directly in permanent housing with some support services, rather than taking up critical Emergency shelter space. This explains why the role of Intake and Assessment has increased in importance over the last few years.

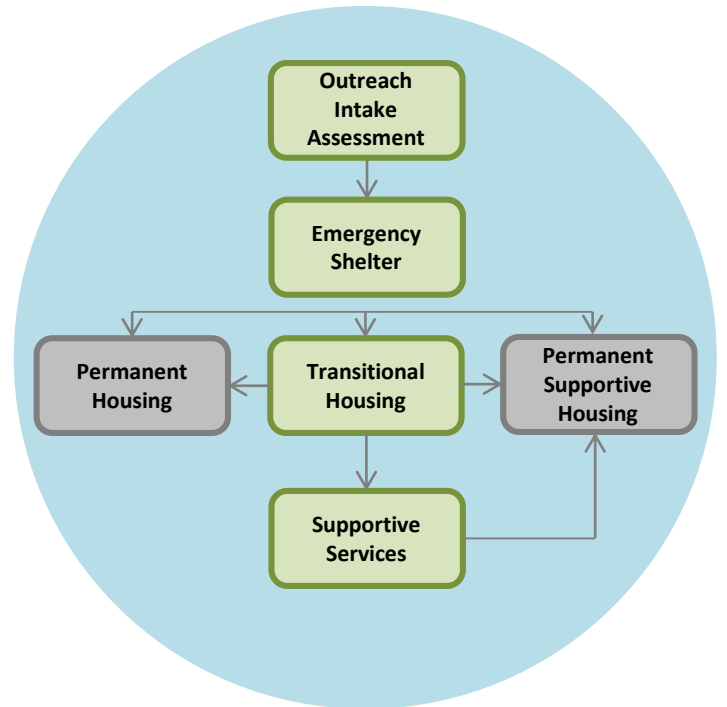


Figure 1

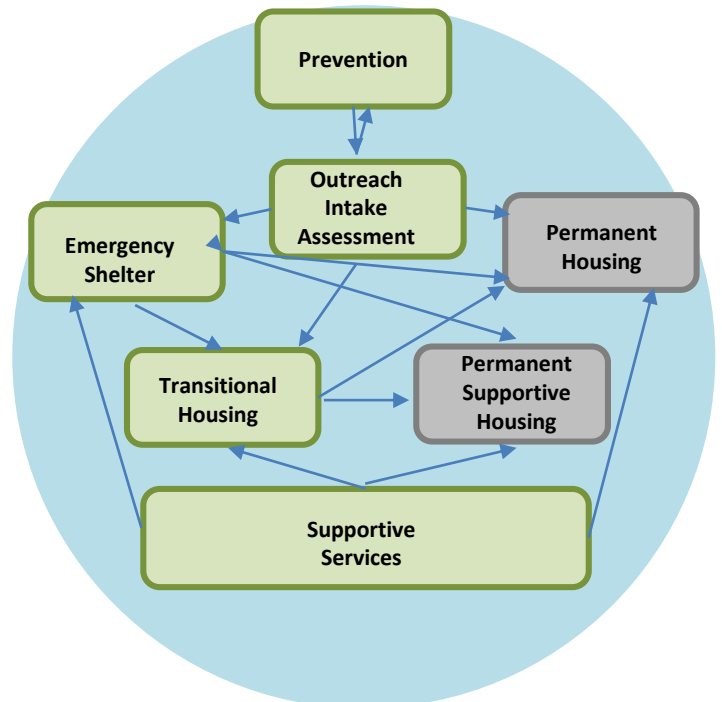


Figure 2



swot analysis

A SWOT analysis is what the name says – SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats – which guide an organization during its strategic planning process. In terms of homelessness, the SWOT analysis conducted over several months in 2010, allowed us to assess what we are currently doing and what we need to look at in terms of future changes.

Strengths

- solid collaborative structure / strong network
- Continuum of Care resources
- long history & understanding of regional challenges
- national & local government support
- support of faith based organizations & nonprofits
- understanding that integrated service works
- many interested individuals / organizations
- talented staff, engaged board members

Weaknesses

- Crisis response rather than taking long-term approach
- public understanding / support (changing)
- disconnect between city & surrounding towns
- insufficient housing subsidies
- lack of supporting data of local homeless situation
- lack of monitoring progress and comparing results

Opportunities

- synthesis of existing systems, better linking
- remove "silo" thinking between service providers
- documenting measurable data for long-lasting results
- initiatives in creating a healthier and more self-sufficient Berks County

Threats

- decrease in funding, federal / state budget
- difficult economic climate
- insufficient public transportation within Berks County
- loss of manufacturing industry
- lack of self-sustaining employment

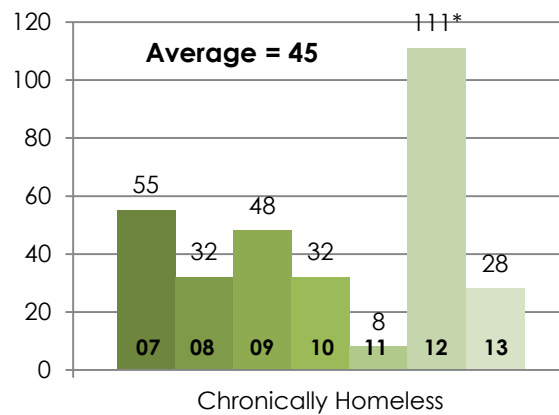
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chronic homelessness

HUD defines the chronic homeless as those individuals with a disabling condition who experience homelessness for over a year, or who have been homeless four times in three years.

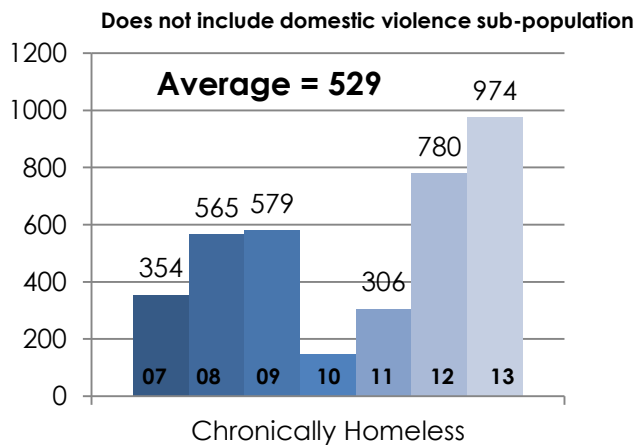
Chronically Homeless Year Over Year [YOY]



* Count was high this year due to a misinterpretation of "chronic" by a new homeless provider.

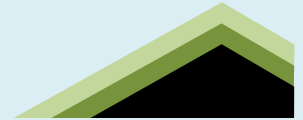
Nationally, the chronically homeless comprise only 10% of shelter consumers but use nearly one-half of the shelter days.

Chronically Homeless & Individuals at Risk for Chronic Homelessness

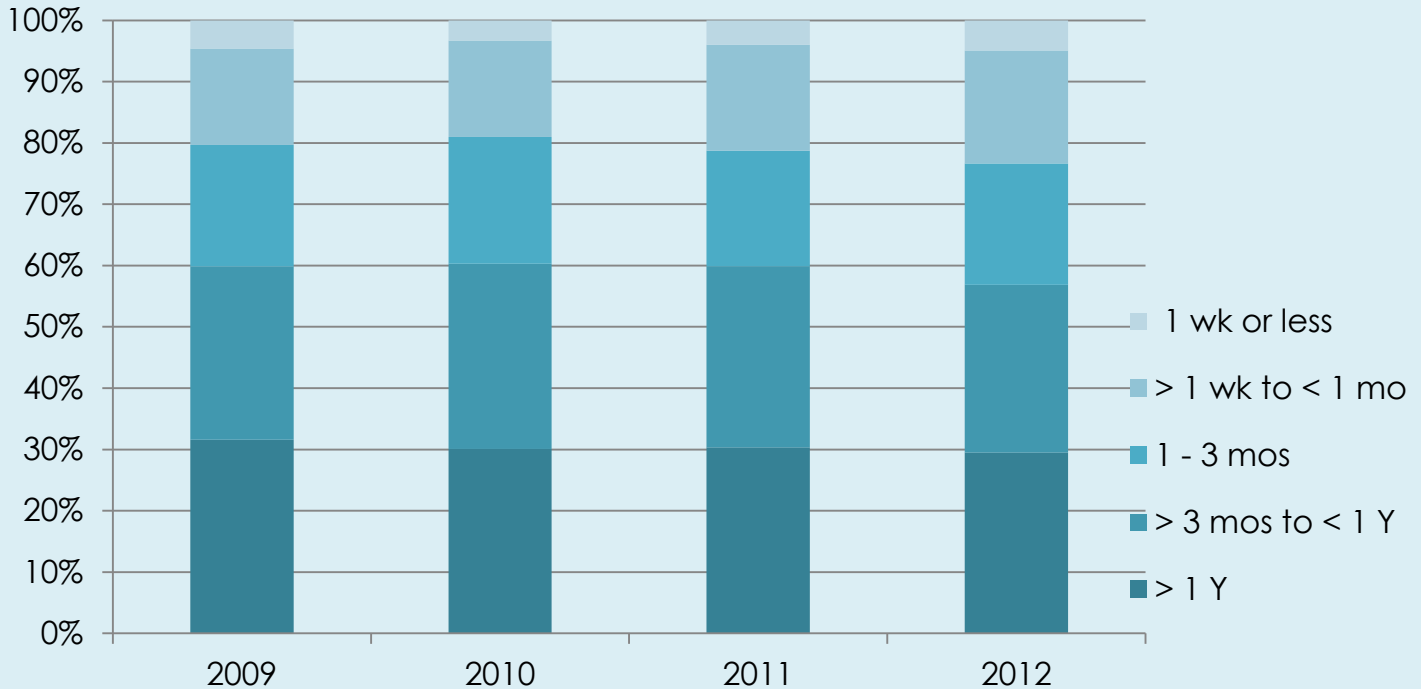


length of stay in emergency shelter

Length of stay numbers from 2007 through 2012 have not experienced significant change.

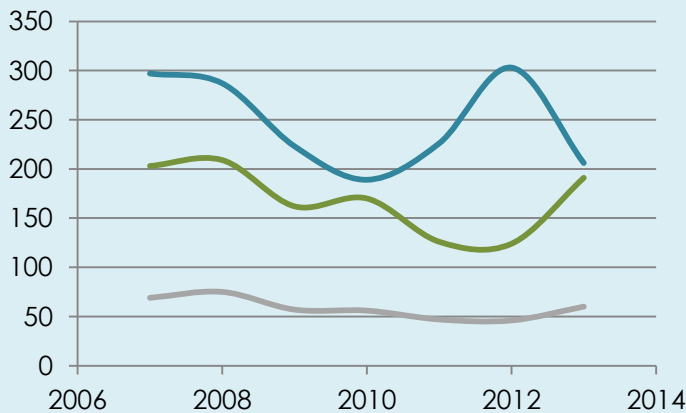


Length of Stay YOY



point-in-time counts

Each year HUD requires BCEH to count the homeless in Berks County. We do this by counting clients in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and those we find unsheltered, living in places not meant for human habitation such as an abandoned building, bus shelter, park bench, or other such place.

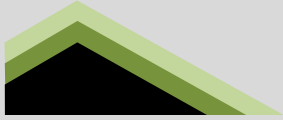


- # of single individuals & persons in households w/o children
- # of families w/ children [households]
- # of persons in families w/ children

Berks County averages 347 evictions, filed monthly.*

Evictions place a huge burden on the social services and emergency shelter system.

* Per the Special Courts Administrator for the 23rd Judicial District of PA.



barriers to self-sufficiency

Identifying Gaps

On September 26, 2011, the New York Times identified Reading, Pennsylvania as the poorest city in the United States with populations over 65,000. There are many reasons Reading was so recognized. The lack of employers in the area, the recent influx of residents migrating from neighboring communities in search of affordable housing, and an average income lower than that of the national average all present challenges to our community. There are additional obstacles facing Reading, one of which is a lack of higher education which can translate into better paying, more secure employment. Only 8 percent of Reading's residents have a bachelor's degree, far below the national average of 28 percent for cities comparable in size to Reading.

Understanding how the educational, economic, and social systems of Berks County are inter-connected is critical. It is not enough to connect those struggling to maintain a home with stable employment. What is needed as a *sustainable solution* is to prepare Berks County to become workforce ready so that employers will be motivated to locate within Berks County, and employees will be equipped with the necessary skill set.

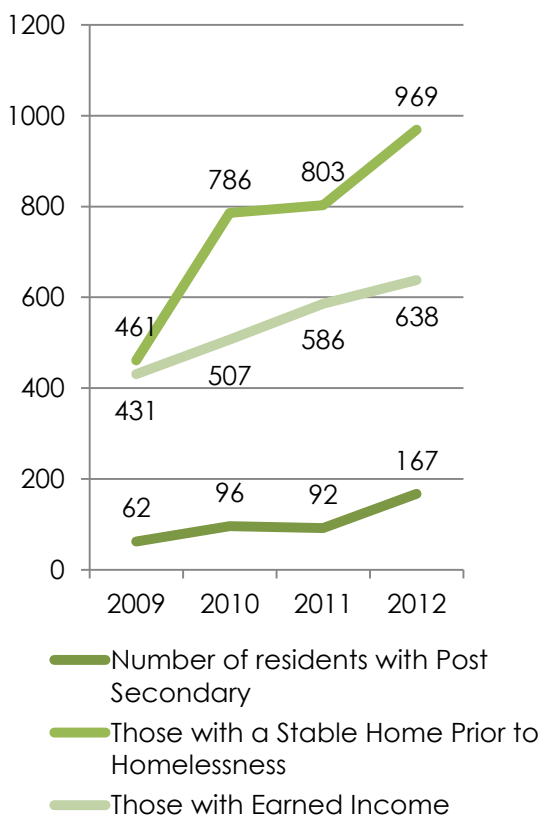


trends

The homeless are **not always** uneducated, **not always** without a history of stable income, and **not always** familiar with the experience of homelessness.

Trends shown in the chart below demonstrate that homelessness among those with a post-secondary education, who were employed, and lived in a previously stable home is rising.

Unique Trends in Berks County YOY



assumptions

- every demographic of our region is affected by homelessness
- a healthier City of Reading creates a healthier Berks County
- Behavioral Health concerns (mental health and addiction) are significant contributors to the homeless population.
- prevention methods & integrated services works best
- high risk factors exist that warrant targeting inter-connected service prevention for all homeless
- transitioning people from shelters within 30 days decreases barriers to self-sufficiency
- establishing a measuring system with regular monitoring will provide more effective prevention methods
- doing nothing costs more
- more decent, safe, affordable, service enriched housing, for families / singles is needed
- continued development of safety nets is needed
- strive to create a more sustainable, synthesized system of services for all vulnerable populations is effective
- decisions that are data driven are most effective
- while federal & state funding is needed - prevention should focus on local resources & talent

Daily Cost of Homelessness

Housing Type	National Avg.	Berks County
County Jail	\$94	\$70*
State Prison	\$87	\$90*
Shelter	\$64	\$28*
Mental Health	\$722	\$1,379
Medical Health	\$1,618	unavailable

Berks County data provided by local agencies in Coalition 2007 Strategic Plan First Draft.
* 2013 data.

**6,205 cases
evaluated annually
of homeless persons
by The Reading
Health System**

cost of homelessness

Why should efforts focus on ending chronic homelessness? According to HUD, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness consume a disproportionate amount of resources. Approximately 10 percent of the chronic homeless population consumes over 50 percent of the resources. They are heavy users of costly public resources, including emergency medical services, psychiatric treatment, drug and alcohol facilities, shelters, and law enforcement / corrections. Additionally, chronic homelessness has a visible impact on a community's safety and attractiveness.

How much will preventing homelessness cost?

The strategies outlined in this Plan will cost money, but it will not cost as much as it would to manage homelessness through expensive public emergency systems long-term. Additionally, the strategies outlined in this Plan will enhance the overall health of the Berks County community toward a more sustainable and self-sufficient region. Homelessness should concern everyone because it affects the entire community.

How can ending homelessness impact the rest of the community?

According to the Social Services Manager at a local health provider the number of homeless patients are increasing. While hospitals are generally not required to maintain statistics on homeless patients, the inpatient individual caseloads indicate that recently there has been an increase compared to recent years. The 17 inpatient social workers estimate that approximately 30 homeless individuals (or someone that fears becoming homeless in the near future) are treated weekly. Some of these patients report they bounce around from friend to friend to have somewhere to stay.

The cost of doing nothing

\$1,500,000

for 15 chronic homeless singles
(over the next 1.5 years)

According to a study done in San Diego, CA



GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1 reduce homelessness overall, including recidivism

The system to respond to homelessness in Berks should include a balance of emergency services, intervention services, and prevention services. All services should be geared toward preventing, reducing, or ending homelessness.

Strategy 1.1 Categorically track all homeless and maintain up-to-date reports on homeless statistics.

Action Steps

- improve coordination of discharge planning among all institutions and CoC.
- increase Homeless Management Information System data collection and usage.
- increase case management efforts, evaluation, and follow through.
- maintain better overall data on the homeless.
- document what services are most effective.
- improve the quality of life for the overall homeless by increasing employment, educational, and healthcare services.
- track the cost of homelessness within specific sub-populations.



Strategy 1.2 Develop a rapid re-housing model for formerly stable homeless families and intervention strategies for those at risk. Those families that demonstrate a stable history, but fell into homelessness due to circumstances, are more likely to be successful in a rapid-rehousing situation.

Action Steps

- provide access to mental health, drug and alcohol, medical, and dental services.
- support all types of recidivism reducing programs, including those that address domestic violence and those exiting the foster care system.
- reduce emergency shelter stays for individuals and families.
- continue and enhance the working relationship with the local VA Medical Centers to ensure that Veterans are provided easier access to treatment and other benefits.
- increase case manager knowledge of available resources to sub-populations such as Veterans, those with a criminal record, and the disabled.
- provide opportunities for recovery for individuals suffering from mental health and addiction-related disorders.

Strategy 1.3 Increase collaboration among providers. Discharge planning is the process of moving a homeless person from one level of care to another or from one living experience to another. Within the CoC, discharge planning refers to the process of a homeless person or formerly homeless person or family transitioning from one institutional living situation such as a prison, mental health facility, hospital, foster care, or shelter into their next living environment. It is necessary for the CoC to ensure that the individual or family is prepared mentally and financially to make this transition, otherwise they may not achieve independence and then return to homelessness.

Action Steps

- improve coordination of discharge planning among all institutions and CoC.
- involve all interested stakeholders including utilizing the formerly homeless to assist in developing best practice strategies to end homelessness.
- develop specialized services for those involved in the criminal justice system.
- Encourage and participate in cross system/program education.



reduce family & youth homelessness

2

Families and youth lose their housing due to a wide variety of reasons, including evictions, foreclosures, poor living conditions, medical problems, financial hardship, domestic violence, fire and natural disasters, and issues related to disabilities.

Strategy 2.1 Expand efforts towards decent, safe affordable, and service enriched housing for family, youth, domestic violence victims, and those with disabilities. Encourage the development of affordable housing by eliminating barriers. Expedite the development process and encourage more developers to build supportive housing within Berks County.

Action Steps

- expand the role of the Permanent Housing Committee to support efforts to develop decent, safe, affordable, and service-enriched housing.
- support scattered site development initiatives that provide units that are not necessarily located in a single building.
- develop relationships with officials and ethical landlords to increase housing inventory.
- develop mutually beneficial partnerships with businesses, school districts, and universities.
- continue to address causative factors and/or conditions that create situations for individuals and families to fall into homelessness.

Strategy 2.2 Increase available resources for families, youth, victims of domestic violence, and those with disabilities.

Action Steps

- support expansion of services for organizations that provide assistance to households experiencing financial distress such as needing weatherization or building improvements, emergency rental assistance, wheel chair accessibility, and budget counseling.
- increase stable housing opportunities by working with local organizations and developers.
- work with local schools to support programs that provide assistance with regards to school supplies, tutoring, transportation, school enrollment, and the lunch program.
- work with local agencies to develop better safety nets with regards to domestic violence victims and those exiting the foster care system.

Strategy 2.3 Develop year round available emergency shelters for families.

Action Steps

- assist in the creation of a sustainable Family Oriented Emergency Shelter Program.
- maximize current resources to develop scattered-site emergency housing for families.

3



reduce emergency length of stay

Strategy 3.1 Redefine the role of emergency shelters by reserving this for emergency situations.

Action Steps

- conduct research to establish a baseline and current average length of stay in shelters for those not chronically homeless.
- research and implement best practices for reducing length of stay in shelters.
- increase research to identify the stages of homelessness within Berks County.
- focus efforts on those at risk of becoming chronically homeless.

Strategy 3.2 Remove barriers associated with transitioning from emergency shelters to permanent housing options..

Action Steps

- Work to develop more permanent housing opportunities to those on a limited income.
- identify and track the reasons that an individual or family is experiencing homelessness.

Strategy 3.3

Reduce length of stay.

Better track and follow case management of those entering homelessness.

Action Steps

- increase after-care programming to achieve better outcomes by determining if needs are being met after leaving emergency or transitional housing.
- better document the events a client experiences after exiting emergency shelter with the focus on examining if more positive permanent housing results are linked to shorter length of stay.



further development

Additional Services

BCEH and its members cannot end homelessness alone. Thanks to efforts by volunteers, faith-based organizations, and service-based organizations many areas of need for homeless populations are being addressed. In order to achieve this goal, a community approach needs to provide more than just housing. BCEH supports Berks County's efforts to provide and enhance the following services:

- housing all veterans
- complete & accept veteran benefits applications
- provide information on public housing, the housing choice voucher program (Section 8), and other subsidized housing programs.
- provide housing counseling
- complete & accept Social Security/SSI applications
- issue Pennsylvania IDs
- obtain birth certificates
- issue free bus tickets
- dental and medical examinations
- offer GED / ESL training informational sessions
- offer eye exams & order eye glasses if needed
- offer legal referral when needed
- provide immigration information and referral
- connect families with child care services for those seeking or returning to employment
- give books away to children and engage children in literacy programs.

Implementation & Monitoring

This Five Year Plan is released to the BCEH Board of Directors review, feedback, and approval for finalization in June 2013. It is recommended that a sub-committee be formed to oversee the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of this Plan annually by:

- analyzing the stages and cost of homelessness.
- identifying target areas of future focus in an effort to increase prevention methods.
- continually review, monitor, and evaluate data.
- suggest budget recommendations – and possible reallocating of funding sources if needed.