

Fairfax County, Virginia

**ANNUAL MESSAGE TO THE
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

March 10, 2008

Linda D. Wimpey, Chair
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Community Council on Homelessness

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to the
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

Presented by Linda D. Wimpey, Chair

Good morning, Chairman Connolly and members of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and County Executive Griffin. Thank you for the opportunity to present this Annual Message on the state of homelessness in the Fairfax-Falls Church area.

For many years we have come to you either under the auspices of the Homeless Oversight Committee or the Community Council on Homelessness with information on the challenges and successes in serving homeless persons. But, we have not yet been able to come to you to say “we have ended homelessness as we know it in our community”, although that is our shared vision.

I’d like to take a few minutes to reflect on where we have been in responding to the challenge of homelessness in our community. Over the past forty years, the faith community has often been the first group to respond to homelessness, providing shelter and basic necessities. When it was determined that a system of services and supports were needed, county shelters were built to temporarily house homeless persons. Last year we opened our sixth and what we hope is our last homeless shelter in Fairfax County. Shelters, though valuable, are NOT permanent housing.

Faith communities came forth again over the past three years to provide hypothermia sheltering with food and other supplies. They learned more about who homeless people are and came to understand and know that hypothermia prevention is not enough – what is needed is permanent housing with supports – housing first. Faith Communities United for Housing formed to provide advocacy for the Plan and to be out there in the community to support your strong leadership and to counteract NIMBYism.

They want to be full partners with the County, businesses, the philanthropic community, and nonprofits to prevent and end homelessness in the Fairfax-Falls Church community. Many of them are here today. Let’s thank them for their commitment and their work.

While the faith communities, the county, and non-profits were doing their hands-on work, the Homeless Oversight Committee followed by the Community Council on Homelessness pursued their charge to advocate for homeless persons. Perhaps the most important activity of the Council has been to pave the way for the substantial change in approach to homelessness: adopting a ten year plan to prevent and end homelessness. This work pointed out that as good as many of the services and programs are, without housing we are not ending homelessness. With a focus on “housing first” we believe we can be successful.

Your leadership has been critical in getting us this far. In 2007, you approved the Blue Print for Success: Strategic Directions for Preventing and Ending Homelessness in the Fairfax-Falls Church Community in 10 years, and called for a committee to develop an Implementation Plan. Extensive community engagement informed the Draft Implementation Plan, which we hope you will endorse unanimously on March 31.

Much work has been done to reach out to all sectors of the community to ensure that our Plan is a good one. During the past month, meetings with homeless persons were held to give them an update on the Plan, to engage them in discussions about what would have prevented them from becoming homeless, what housing they need, and what supportive services they need to stay in housing once they are re-housed.

The homeless men and women with whom we spoke expressed a strong desire to work; they did not ask for handouts. All of them indicated they could contribute towards rent but not pay market rent.

Common themes from these dialogues were:

1. Economic - Past incomes were inadequate to cover the rising costs of housing.
2. Housing located near good public transportation is critical.
3. Assistance with budgeting, money management, and credit reduction were essential to maintaining housing.
4. Services related to employment including job training and placement were important. For families, the limit of 50 hours of subsidized child care per week was an obstacle if the parent wanted to work fulltime and go to school.
5. Lack of showers and clean clothes was a major barrier to employment.
6. Those who had criminal histories and had served them time expressed great frustration at being unable to the get jobs and housing so that they could start over.

7. Health care, assistance with basic needs and housing deposits were identified as important to moving out of homelessness.

It was clear that these men and women want to be partners with us in ending their plight.

We are also very grateful to each of you Supervisors for carving precious time out of your busy schedules to meet with many of us from the Implementation Committee and many from the faith community to discuss the Plan to prevent and end homelessness. Several themes arose from those conversations:

- How much does the plan cost?
- Is it a more effective and efficient system than what we have now?
- Are we creating another bureaucracy?
- What will be the community reaction?

Serious attention has been given each of these questions and concerns. On the question of cost, research on other communities' successful efforts to prevent and end homelessness indicate that preventing and ending homelessness is more cost-effective than utilizing shelters as "housing" for long periods of time and over use of hospitals and other institutions, such as jails and emergency rooms. However, there are also intangible benefits to the community. Stable housing helps people get and keep jobs and contribute to the community, helps children do better in school, and improves the health of both children and adults. All these things improve the quality of life for the entire community.

We recognize that we are in a difficult budget cycle. We do not need all new resources. There is much we can do to begin implementation of the Plan through re-orienting and re-directing current resources. However, homelessness and affordable, appropriate housing are inextricably interwoven. In the coming years, new resources, both public and private, will need to be developed, especially if we are to have adequate affordable housing for persons at very low incomes.

The Plan calls for a governance structure to oversee implementation of the Plan. There have been questions about whether the new structure is just another bureaucracy. Our answer is a resounding no. Effective work is being done by coordinating activities in other areas, such as revitalization, and we believe that the proposed governance structure will have the same type of impact. It will more actively engage the faith community and the business community with non-profits and government in preventing and ending homelessness by:

- creating a central office, located within the county's human services system,
- hiring a director with responsibility to coordinate implementation of this Plan,
- deploying existing county staff working on homeless services consistent with the Plan's goal to end homelessness,
- engaging community and faith based volunteers and non-profit staff,
- providing homeless services with a focus on ending homelessness.

This will result in:

- efficient and more effectively coordinated services,
- additional financial resources through the establishment of a nonprofit foundation to serve as a conduit for new monies,
- a mechanism for holding us all accountable for preventing and ending homelessness,
- metrics and regular reports to the community on our success in reducing the number of homeless persons over time.

This restructuring/redesign, which will move us all out of our silos and into a coordinated, team approach, is critical to prevent and end homelessness.

Communication and education about homelessness in the community will be enhanced. Currently, a website and toolkit with materials on ending homelessness in Fairfax-Falls Church Community are available for use in these efforts.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Freddie Mac and the Freddie Mac Foundation for their ongoing leadership and support for our efforts – from funding of the 2006 Summit and for consultants to facilitate development of the Plan to support for our communication and education efforts in the community on the issues of homelessness. We also want to thank county staff for their invaluable assistance.

Funders and businesses like Freddie Mac, faith communities, and even school children, through local walks to raise funds to benefit homeless persons, stand ready to be full partners with the County in ending homelessness.

We want to thank you in advance for what we hope is unanimous approval of the Implementation Plan, which will be an action item for you on March 31. Then the real work begins. The Board and community working together can ensure that the Plan gets implemented and that there is accountability each step of the way.

What we also need you to do – and the good news is it reduces waste and maximizes resources – is to make clear to all of your appointed boards, authorities, commissions and other advisory groups that they need to participate in and support the Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. That means eliminating policies and practices that work against implementation of the “housing first” approach and increase demands on the shelter system. We need everyone in the County to work together to accomplish this goal. The faith community is pulling together to help. County agencies, governing and advisory groups take their lead and direction from you and we ask you to express clearly to each your expectation for their cooperation with and participation in implementation of the Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.

The Council on Homelessness can go out of business this summer. Next year the Chair of the Governing Board of the Community Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness and the Director of the Office to End Homelessness can be standing here to give this report which we trust will show an decrease in the number of homeless persons and an increase in the number of households who are prevented from becoming homeless. We ask the Board to make this happen with your approval of the Plan on March 31. The community and the county agencies are ready to move forward.

The words of homeless persons about their experience speak more eloquently than I can about what we are working to accomplish. A profound statement about the impact of family homelessness was in a 1991 report to the Board of Supervisors from Michael, an eleven year old resident in one of the County’s homeless shelters. He said in part, “If I could have a wish, I’d wish for a 5 story yellow house, with my own room. “ He went into detail about furnishings and pets desired and ended with, “and I’d be a kid!” Or listen to the words of Sam, a homeless adult, who said “I just need a room with a microwave and a shower so I can go to work.” This is what ending homelessness is all about.

Wouldn’t it be great if our community became known as: FAIRFAX: WHERE EVERYONE HAS A HOME!

A quote recently in the news, and I think originally from Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks to the need to get to work in ensuring that Fairfax is the place where everyone has a home – the quote is “the fierce urgency of now.”

Thank you.