

**HOMELESS OVERSIGHT**

**COMMITTEE**

**ANNUAL MESSAGE TO THE**

**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

**Fairfax County, Virginia**

**March 4, 2002**

**Sharon Kelso, Peyton Whiteley, Carla Taylor**

**Co-Chairs**

**Annual Message to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors**  
**Homeless Oversight Committee**  
**March 4, 2002**

**Introduction:**

Chairman Hanley, Members of the Board of Supervisors, Mr. Griffin:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Homeless Oversight Committee. My name is Sharon Kelso, and I serve as co-chairman, along with Peyton Whiteley and Carla Taylor. The Homeless Oversight Committee has completed a busy but productive year in its efforts to facilitate the HUD Continuum of Care Planning Process, and support the homeless service delivery system in the county.

We want to take this opportunity to thank the Board for its leadership and commitment to the Continuum of Care. But our work is far from over: homelessness continues to generate lost productivity in the county's business community due to lost work days by homeless employees, it disrupts children's education and school attendance and interrupts the therapeutic progress of disabled individuals.

Each year, Fairfax County conducts a Point In Time Survey to develop an unduplicated count of homeless individuals and families. The results of the January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002, survey are in, and they don't look good.

At 2,067, the number of homeless persons is the highest it has been in the five years the survey has been conducted!

- Tragically, 843 of those were homeless children.
- But 41% of all homeless adults, including 29% of single adults and 63% of the adults in families, were employed.

And this is only a snapshot of the problem. The numbers represent a ONE DAY, not year long count of homeless persons, and do not include those who are doubled and tripled up in housing units and are, for all intents and purposes, homeless also!

Since our last report to the Board, the waiting list for family shelters has had from 60 to 70 or more families at a time, with an average wait of 90 days for the average-size family to get into a shelter. Large families often wait much longer. As families go from “pillar to post” during that time, children miss school, and parents find it nearly impossible to maintain steady employment.

Another sign that things are getting worse can be found in Coordinated Services Planning statistics showing that requests for emergency financial assistance for rent/mortgage and utilities increased by 30% between calendar year 2000 and 2001.

The attached fact sheet demonstrates that other factors such as rent increases, a tight rental market, the absence of new affordable housing production and loss of units available for low income households further threatens efforts to end homelessness in our county. The turn-back rate for holders of Housing Choice Vouchers has reached an all time high. Two-thirds of the households issued vouchers in January-March 2001 were unable to find housing within the eight months allowed.

Last year, the Homeless Oversight Committee called on the Board to expand the capacity of its family shelter system. We are extremely appreciative of efforts in the past year by the Board of Supervisors, especially Elaine McConnell, County Executive Tony Griffin, as well as county staff, who worked to respond to the need for a fourth family shelter.

Although market forces blocked the County's first choice for acquiring land for a new shelter, we understand there is appropriate publicly owned property available which could be used for this purpose. We request you direct staff to identify the best available property for a shelter, and to begin the site planning and get development underway this year. We believe, even in this very difficult financial climate for the county, this prompt action is feasible and can be done by tapping into funds in the Housing Trust Fund and/or by utilizing other resources, if necessary. We request this recommendation be given the highest priority by the Board, with a goal of beginning construction before the end of calendar year 2002.

We also want to stress the urgent need to expand affordable housing production. It is unacceptable for hard working, fully employed citizens of this county to find themselves without permanent affordable housing. Nor

does it speak well of us when our vulnerable mentally ill population must live under bridges or in the woods. In addition to the strategies currently undertaken by the county's Department of Housing, in partnership with several community based organizations, we ask the county to explore using local tax credits to increase the supply of affordable housing. There are several models for this credit. The state's Tax Credit Reduction Program, for example, allows tax credits for landlords of priority populations such as the formerly homeless. Such programs can provide additional incentives for private sector participation.

The Homeless Oversight Committee concludes its Annual Message by sharing with you the perception of many from the grass roots of this community that there is a growing sense of desperation among the poor in Fairfax County who see their safety nets disappearing. We know this is a tough budget year, but the homeless in this county are in no position to share in any cost cutting strategies. We therefore urge your full support of existing programs, and your commitment to the additional recommendations we have made today. As Margaret Mead has said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

**FACTS**

- Homelessness has remained high over the past five years in spite of a strong economy (which has only slowed in the past year):

Year	1998	1,658 total homeless
Year	1999	1,789 total homeless
Year	2000	2,013 total homeless
Year	2001	1,935 total homeless
Year	2002	2,067 total homeless

- A survey conducted on January 24, 2002, of all known homeless county residents identified a homeless population of 2,067: 782 single individuals, and 442 adults with 843 children in 356 homeless families. These numbers do not account for families and individuals at risk of homelessness who are temporarily housed in doubled or tripled housing situations.
- The waiting list for the family shelters has continued to average 60 to 70 or more families over the past year. The County's shelters can only accommodate about 35 families at one time. It often takes three to four months to get into a shelter, with an average wait of 90 days for the average-sized family, with large families often taking much longer to get into a shelter.
- The County has continued to house families in motels. This is an expensive and undesirable alternative to shelter, but may be the only option available in a crisis.
- The turn-back rate for Housing Choice vouchers reached the highest level ever for households issued vouchers in January-March 2001. Even with 8 months to look, some two-thirds of these vouchers were not used because the holder could not find a place to rent.
- The cost of market housing in rental complexes continues to rise. The average two-bedroom rent was \$1,181 in January 2001 (a 13.8% increase since January 2000) and the vacancy rate was only 2.5%. The availability of affordable units is even tighter, and many private rentals no longer accept vouchers, or units have been sold. Over half of the vouchers under lease are in private rentals, not from multi-family rental complexes.
- Agencies that provide housing counseling and homeless prevention services report an increase in use of prevention services and assistance since last year. Requests for emergency financial assistance for rent/mortgage and utilities increased by 30% between calendar years 2000 and 2001. The difficulty in obtaining housing makes it even more critical to help people who have a place to live to retain the housing that they have.