

Homelessness In Rural America?

When one hears the word, “Homeless” this usually conjures up images of a dishelved man or woman pushing a rickety and rusted shopping cart down an urban alleyway or a panhandler sitting on a bustling populated street corner with tin cup in hand. Homelessness is often thought of as only an urban phenomenon because the homeless are more prevalent and geographically concentrated in cities and metropolitan areas. The ‘big screen’ and Hollywood movie execs also have a strong influence on how Americans perceive homelessness. Most movies involving a scene(s) with homeless individuals are shot in urban areas, thus amplifying the perception that homelessness must only be an urban issue. However, people experience homelessness and housing distress in rural communities across America, too. The picture of rural homelessness is much different than that of their urban counterparts. Understanding the components and causes of rural homelessness requires a more flexible definition of the word “homeless”. People experiencing homelessness in rural America are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter, and more likely to live in a car or camper, with relatives in overcrowded, and often times, substandard housing, or in tents located in rural wooded areas. Unlike urban America where homeless shelters and soup kitchens are abound, there are fewer shelters (often times none) and services for the homeless in rural communities.

Health Care For The Rural Homeless

Poor mental health or physical health can often times be the primary cause of homelessness, more often it is homelessness that causes or contributes to severe and life-threatening health conditions. Chronic and acute health problems often result from poor living conditions and contribute to the cyclical pattern of homelessness. Due to the lack of access to health care in rural communities, the homeless delay treatment for conditions, which often times leads to more severe and costly health outcomes. The amount of uncompensated health care for the rural homeless, most being uninsured, has spillover effects on the entire rural community. The public subsidy of care for the homeless and uninsured can cause higher taxes and budget cuts elsewhere within local communities. Rural America’s health care ‘safety-net’ is slowly being stretched beyond capacity and the lack of health care services in rural areas creates even greater pressure on this system of care. The largest obstacle to health care that the rural homeless face is the non-existent continuum of care for health care and social services. Unlike urban homeless which usually have a variety of programs and services they can access for health care and social services— rural homeless are often left with severely limited services (often times due to lack of financial resources within the community) and sometimes there are no services available at all.

Foundation of Heartland Rural Health Services (HRHS)

Heartland Rural Health Network, Inc. (HRHN) is a member of the Highlands County Coalition for the Homeless and the Florida Heartland Rural Consortia for the Homeless. HRHN made a commitment to bring health care providers “to the table” in an effort to develop an integrated healthcare delivery system. The goal of the HRHS program is to offer a centralized location for the homeless and uninsured residents of Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties to access free health screenings (physical/psycho-social/substance abuse) and referrals to local providers of care, which aims to reduce unnecessary visits to the ‘safety net’ providers such as the local hospital Emergency Departments. The HRHS Case Manager sets up a treatment plan with the client and schedules necessary appointments with health care and social service agencies. Along with the assessments and case management, HRHS provides Prescription Assistance Services. The HRHS program operates on grant funds so to ensure the sustainability of the HRHS program HRHN is continually seeking new avenues to fund this much needed program.

Grant Awards & Support

Funding for program operations has helped sustain the HRHS Outreach Program. The Florida State Office of Rural Health, the Florida Department of Children & Families grants, as well as the Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida, Inc. have all contributed funding to continue operating our successful outreach program.

HRHN was awarded \$22,385 through the Florida Department of Health, State Office of Rural Health. This grant funding was applied towards HRHS Outreach Prescription Assistance services, Program Infrastructure Development, and Technical Support and licenses for the Health Information System utilized by the program. HRHN also received funding through the Florida Department of Children & Families Challenge Grant (FY 2006) in the amount of **\$10,000.00**. In 2001, Governor Jeb Bush signed into law a bill that created the Challenge Grant program, the Council on Homelessness and DCF's Office of Homelessness. Challenge Grants allow recipients to fund new activities or expand current services provided under their Continuum of Care (COC) plans that otherwise would not be carried out due to lack of funding resources. HRHN utilized these monies to provide health care service vouchers for homeless clients in Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties that need assistance accessing health care services as well as partial salary for the Case Manager. Clients are screened for eligibility, and if determined eligible, the client will be issued a service voucher that is applied towards their visit fee with participating providers and agencies in Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties. Some providers/agencies also provide their health care services on a sliding scale, and the fee assessed to the client depends on their income.

HRHN also was awarded a Department of Children & Families Grant-In-Aid in the amount of **\$7,320.00** in FY 2006. The grant money was applied towards health care service vouchers for Hardee and Highlands County homeless individuals and vehicle upkeep for the Motor Coach purchased by HRHN last year. This motor coach, converted into two offices, travels through Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties and provides accessible services for the homeless and uninsured within these communities by providing health screenings, medication assistance, and public assistance enrollment.

Both the Challenge Grant and Grant-In-Aid funding ended on June 30, 2006. HRHN has submitted another Challenge Grant in the amount of \$40,000 for FY 2006-2007, and the expected award date is November, 2006. The release of the Grant-In-Aid for FY 2006-2007, which HRHN will apply for again, is expected within the next month.

The latest grant awarded to Heartland Rural Health Network for the HRHS Outreach Program is through the Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida, Inc. The Blue Foundation graciously awarded the Network **\$35,000** to expand program services and provide an even greater number of assessments and vouchers for the uninsured and homeless individuals within rural Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties. This grant provides programmatic assistance for one year.

If you would like more information on the HRHS Outreach program or know of someone within Highlands, Hardee, or DeSoto Counties that could benefit from the program please call **863-452-6530** or visit **www.hrhn.org**