

Community Council
Study Committee
Meeting Summary
February 3, 2009

Present: Linda Dammarell, Eloise Phillips, Samantha Bowen, Tim Meliah, Melinda Brennan, Holly T. Howard, Kate Bobrow-Strain, Chris Howard, Karen Kirkwood, Alice Bagley, Teri Barila, Pat Yenny, Mark Brown, Nancy Carter, Carlotta Richardson, Punkey Adams, C. Godard-Gross, Larry Mulkerin, Pam Allen, Susan Day, Cynthia Selde, Paula Nichols, Lucy Gregoire, Norrie Gregoire, Brenda Kirk, Michelle Carpenter, Leslie Stahlnecker, Aaron Randall, Terry Heisey, Harvey Crowder, Dorothy Knudson, Judy Mulkerin, Carmen Bernal, Peggy Sanderson, William Sanderson, Karen Wolf, Patricia Camp, Roger Bairstow, Julie Reese

Chairman Roger Bairstow opened the session with a review of the January 27 group process check. The summary from that meeting was distributed and summaries from the January 13 and 20 sessions were adopted. When presenters don't answer the questions from the audience when they respond to the summary, they may be left unanswered with the notation that the group still would like to have the information.

Anne-Marie Schwerin, YWCA, Cindy Wallace, Christian Aid Center, and Kathy Covey, Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC), were introduced as the evening's speakers on the topic *Homelessness, Transitional Housing and Domestic Violence*. All participate in Walla Walla's Homeless Coalition and explained their agencies' programs and how the Coalition functions. The Coalition reviews the continuum of care process in the county and works with both "bricks and mortar" and service issues. The continuum of care is:

1. Prevention

Helpline is able to provide limited help with rent if a person or family is about to be evicted or can help with part of a deposit for a homeless person who needs just that to access housing. They also provide motel vouchers for 1-3 nights for people who come into their office presenting as homeless without shelter. The vouchers are also made available to homeless people after hours and on weekends through the police department on an immediate-need basis. The Helpline motel vouchers and rental assistance are part of a contract that BMAC has with Helpline through the Emergency Shelter assistance Program (state-funded). The police department vouchers are funded through the County 2160. All "motel voucher" options for shelter are very costly.

2. Shelter

Both the YWCA and Christian Aid Center provide temporary shelter which may range from a few nights to as long as nine months.

The YWCA has always had a housing focus, providing safe, respectable, affordable housing for women. Since the 1980's, that has included safe shelter for victims (women and children) of domestic violence. They operate two shelters: the women's residence offers 13 dorm-style rooms with centralized living area, kitchen, and communal bathroom, and a family shelter to accommodate larger families. Both have been full since they opened. In 2008, they recorded over 9,000 bed-nights.

In 1997, the YWCA had no bilingual/bi-cultural staff members and served three Hispanic clients. With the hiring of a half-time bilingual/bi-cultural crisis staffer, that number increased to 50. Currently, there are two full-time bilingual/bi-cultural staff members, a bilingual/bi-cultural crisis line worker and 43% of the clients are Hispanic.

There is a trend for people to stay longer in the shelter because safety, credit and other background issues mean they have nowhere else to go. Until recently, if they moved from the shelter to stay with family they were disqualified for transitional housing assistance. Often that meant that domestic violence victims felt they had no recourse but to move back to the situation they were trying to leave.

Being near the state border, the YWCA has to deal with multi-state protection orders and other legal matters, as well as funding and state codes. Clients from Oregon come to Washington seeking better service or because they have unsuccessfully tried every resource they can identify.

In 2008, the Christian Aid Center provided 14,493 bed-night services for 321 homeless families, including 247 children under 17. That represents a 400% increase in five years. (They had to expand their number of beds to do so.) Currently at the shelter, there are 20 children between the ages of one week and 16 years of age. While some shelters do not accommodate males, the Christian Aid Center accepts males up to age 18 if they are living with their parent.

The Christian Aid Center is faith-based but not church-related. Women staying at the Christian Aid Center are asked to attend a half-hour devotion weekday mornings. Men staying at the Christian Aid Center have the option to attend men's Bible study on weekdays or chapel in the evenings. Accommodations are made for school, work, or appointment conflicts. The clients are encouraged to engage with a local church, but attendance is not required.

The Christian Aid Center receives referrals from all over the country. Clientele is predominantly Caucasian. Cindy noted that the Hispanic population seems to care for their own homeless, but that requests by Spanish-speaking women are increasing.

Anecdotally, the shelters are serving generational homeless, having sheltered the parents and then later their adult children. At the same time, they are providing emergency shelter for families who are homeless for the first time in their lives.

Each August, September and October, the Homeless Coalition collects "turn-away" data and submits it to Susan Kralman, BMAC. The numbers rose from 113 households in 2007 to 154 households in 2008. "Turn-away" may include those requesting services that could not be accommodated due to lack of space or, as Kathy noted, because they chose not to utilize the Christian Aid Center or they were not permitted into the YWCA because of previous infractions, or for any of a number of other reasons. Anne-Marie noted that many of the people turned away had limited contact, often no face-to-face interaction. People call, ask if there are any rooms available, and don't come in for an intake process rooms are not available. Some of the people initially turned away may have been helped later, but there is no way of knowing, in most cases, if they were part of the 113 turned away. The Coalition is developing an information management system that will eventually allow them to track what happens to these individuals.

Families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Locally, as well as nationally, this is attributed to a lack of affordable housing. These people may be living in cars, with families or friends, on the street or in unsafe conditions because that is the only place the parent or caregiver could find shelter.

If the shelters are full there are limited options for the family in crisis. The shelter staff works with them to access necessary service. They may provide several nights in a motel while those already in the shelter are rearranged to make more room. The family may be referred to another shelter outside the Walla Walla area, to churches, to family and friends. The YWCA is part of a statewide network and may be able to place the family in another community. Sometimes the families are asked if they're willing to relocate to find space.

Emergency shelter for unaccompanied minors is an identified need in the Walla Walla community. Teri Barila is actively involved in addressing this need. Unaccompanied minors are not currently served by any formal shelter/housing program. The YWCA cannot shelter unaccompanied minors unless they are emancipated or have parental permission because they could be charged with harboring a runaway or kidnapping. The shelter is geared to adult women and does not have programming to address the special needs of unaccompanied teens. They work with the teen to identify support systems and safe people and contact DCFS about the Options Beds for homeless teens.

Parents want to provide basic needs (shelter, food, safety) for their families. Financial pressures cause problems within families, sometimes leading to domestic violence and despair. Homeless children often reflect family pressures through anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, behavior issues, fear, and grief (loss of possessions, home, security). When their basic needs are met, trust is built and they begin to interact with others.

Parents have expressed the need for parenting classes that help families *prior* to intervention by school or law enforcement. They want help in learning how to talk to their teens, how to deal with two year olds, what is appropriate discipline, what does it mean when a kid threatens to turn in their parents to CPS if parents discipline a child, etc. Expectant parents have also asked for help knowing what to expect in terms of infant/toddler behavior and child developmental stages.

3. Transitional housing

To move into transitional housing the onus is on the client to do the paperwork, get it in, and get to the appointments. This is not always easy for a person in crisis or in the early days post-crisis. Once a person has been approved for a voucher, they must locate an apartment that meets Housing Quality Standard, will take the voucher, and will rent to the tenant. Many clients have difficulty negotiating with prospective landlords. YWCA advocates help whenever possible, if the client requests the help. If the client is not successful in finding a place that meets all the requirements and is not accepted by a landlord within a set time period, they lose the voucher and have to start over at the bottom of the list.

Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC) provides help with transitional housing (the step between shelter and permanent housing situations) for families with children. They are able to accommodate about 15 families at a time and serve 22-25 families each year. The current program is only available to families with children. Transitional housing is not currently available to single women. The primary population served currently is single women with children, however the program has served single men with children and couples with children.

BMAC offers scattered site transitional housing. They help clients find apartments or houses throughout the county/region. The client has some choice, but is limited by housing availability, the client's credit history and other background issues.

Kathy said BMAC is successful because landlords know they have a track record of working with clients; they can help with the security deposit; and if the client leaves the place in poor condition, BMAC will step in to make it right. To qualify for the BMAC transitional housing program, the client's strengths and weaknesses are assessed and they must express a willingness to be engaged with a program where there is very close contact with the case manager. They meet weekly to work toward family goals, and the case manager visits the home twice monthly. Expected outcomes are that the family will meet its goals (established with the case worker), will have positive financial improvement, and will move to permanent (subsidized or unsubsidized) housing.

BMAC works with the families to develop responsibility and to feel like they are part of the world around them. Believing safe, clean home environments are conducive to stability, BMAC offers minor home repairs and encourages cleanliness. Basic foods are available on an emergency basis. Families are encouraged to maintain supportive relationships with families and other agencies (i.e. case managers from the shelter where they lived previously), and with their neighbors.

4. Permanent Housing

The number of housing units which will accept housing choice vouchers, tenant-based rental assistance, and BMAC transitional housing subsidies has decreased within the Walla Walla area. Most of the properties with which BMAC has been involved have funding sources that would not allow rent-to-own programs.

According to HUD, Fair Market Rent for Walla Walla is studio (\$390), 1 bedroom (\$456), 2 bedroom (\$601), 3 bedroom (\$864), 4 bedroom (\$891), and 5 bedroom (\$1,025). Most landlords require first and last months' rent and deposit, which for some families is as much as \$3000, and which most are not able to afford.

To afford a house (at national fair market rent) without subsidy, the family would need to make \$33,924/year. The average annual income in Walla Walla is \$26,188/year, according to Port of Walla Walla statistics. There is a burgeoning wait list for affordable housing (six months to a year) and low income families cannot afford it without subsidy (sometimes even when both parents are working).

To be approved for housing subsidies, a rental unit must pass an inspection and the individual who wants to rent must be eligible and work their way up the waiting list for approval. Not all landlords want HUD subsidy because the subsidy rate is lower than are market rents. All landlords who are willing to “live” within the rent limits *and* meet the required housing standards have been accessed and are utilized.

This is increasing the stays in shelters. There is a need for more permanent housing so that shelters can be shelters, not long-term housing solutions, and so that those in need can attain housing stability. The speakers estimated that 50 new permanent family housing units would not be too many.

The continuum provides varying amounts of “case management”, contact with those receiving the assistance and helping them manage their lives in a very structured way. The closer the contact and the greater the services provided, the more successful the outcomes have proven to be. In all cases the agency works with the family to determine “what’s the next step?” and to help the family access the resources needed to be stable. These may include income or education strategies. As they are advocacy-based, the agencies help with options, provide referrals, and help families to access resources, such as mental health and substance abuse programs and financial counseling. The clients make their own decisions.

About 80% of the participants “graduate” successfully.

Work with other agencies

1. The Department of Child and Family Services has been very responsive.
2. The Parent Project through DCFS assisted parents in addressing behavioral issues with teens at risk, but there is a need for parenting classes that serve parents with pre-school and elementary age children.
3. Yolanda White, homeless advocate for the Walla Walla Public Schools, helps get student assessments. (Children often have behavior issues as a result of childhood trauma.) She also works with families and school staff to find ways for the child to be in school. (She is not involved at a systems level in any homeless services planning or coordination.)
4. BMAC has been able to connect parents with parenting classes at Children’s Home Society and have used the CHS Home Team n a number of occasions.
5. There has not been a lot of interaction between the Christian Aid Center and the Children’s Home Society because of financial and insurance requirements, but they are working to overcome those barriers.
6. Seeking help from the Department of Human Services has not been a positive experience for the children in shelters and transitional housing. There are limited clinicians for children and the paperwork is extremely difficult to complete.
7. The YWCA has a full range of services for sexual abuse victims, from crisis response to individual advocacy-based counseling, therapy, legal advocacy, and support groups. They serve children and adults. They have also provided shelter for sexual abuse victims who were unable to return home.
8. Cindy cited one ongoing situation that has been unresolved because of school district policies. Two brothers attend different programs in the same school. The school bus will transport one, but refuses service to the other who is going to the same place at the same time. The mother must transport the second child. A need for greater coordination with the Walla Walla Public Schools was expressed. *[Per Cindy, in the week following the presentation, Yolanda White made recommendations to rectify this situation.]*
9. Agencies regularly work together, contributing financial or in-kind services.
10. The police department handles vouchers for weekend homeless requests.
11. Walla Walla has been developing a comprehensive plan and the homeless coalition has been working to ensure that they preserve the multi-family zoning that is already in place. The planning commission has been open to their suggestions and comments.

Other communities

The YWCA has a branch in the Dayton General Hospital . An advocate works throughout the Touchet Valley. The YWCA makes referrals to Blue Mountain Counseling, and staff members from that agency participate in the Columbia County Domestic Violence-Sexual Abuse Coalition. The YWCA doesn't have many shelter clients from Columbia County.

Project Timothy uses grant funds to provide nights in a Dayton motel through the Emergency Shelter Assistance Program grant provided through BMAC (just like Helpline has). Project Timothy also provides rent assistance through this same program,

Funding for the Transitional Housing Program

The Blue Mountain Action Council receives federal funding from Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to help families move from shelter to permanent housing. Christian Aid Center does not receive state or federal funding, but is supported with private donations and foundation awards.

Model programs

Cindy cited the Union Gospel Mission in Seattle as a program that successfully provides shelter for women and children. They offer programs such as licensed day care, on-site opportunities to qualify for a GED, and assistance with life issues.

Questions *Note: All of the Committee's questions were addressed by all three presenters and are incorporated into the summary, however the following comments from Anne-Marie warrant consideration:*

1. **Re: the Committee's perception of vacant housing in the area:** It would be interesting to learn if the perceived vacant houses are rentals or second homes used only a couple weeks a year. I learned that 20% of the housing stock in Walla Walla last year was considered second homes. This number could be confirmed with Development Services at the City.
2. **Re: whether homeless children grow up to become homeless adults?** A book she is reading suggests the likelihood of a homeless child becoming a homeless adult is greater for homeless kids than for non-homeless kids, depending upon the length of the child's homelessness, when homelessness ends, and what life is like.
3. Re: systems level recommendations included in the 10-year plan to end homelessness? **Anne-Marie will provide a copy of the plan if people wish to study it. Section 6 addresses State legislative and policy changes; Section 7 outlines long- and short- term activities. Some of them are systems-focused.**
4. Suggestion: **Ask Department of Child and Family Services to provide information about rules/regulations involving sheltering unaccompanied minors.**

Findings:

1. There is a large need for shelter and transitional housing for single women without children.
2. The lack of affordable housing is the number one cause of homelessness.
3. There is difficulty connecting children with counseling services at the County and parents with parenting classes at Children's Home Society. *[Kathy Covey's response to this finding: "BMAC has not had any difficulty connecting parents with parenting classes at CHS or any other services at CHS for that matter."]*
4. Trained social workers have difficulty accessing the Department of Human Services system.
5. There is a homeless child advocate in the Walla Walla Public Schools.
6. The community needs to work to preserve multi-family residential zoning.
7. A group went before the Walla Walla City Council and asked that zoning for multi-family residences not be changed to light industrial zoning.
8. A child's basic needs must be met for them to gain security, stability and success.
9. Behavior problems are common in children who are homeless.
10. Kathy Covey anecdotally said that clients who show willingness to engage tend to have better outcomes.
11. The Christian Aid Center has had a 400% in service utilization during the last 5 years and anecdotally has seen an increase in family homelessness.
12. There is an effective relationship between the Christian Aid Center and the Department of Child and Family Services.

- 13.** Income necessary to pay for housing in Walla Walla is \$26188/year. \$33924/year is the national income necessary at 100% fair market rate.
- 14.** YWCA increased services to bilingual/bi-cultural community by adding bilingual/bi-cultural staff.
- 15.** Cindy expressed the need at the systems level for better coordination of services between Walla Walla School District and the Christian Aid Center.
- 16.** The speakers estimate that 60-75% of their homeless clients have mental health needs.
- 17.** Walla Walla has a 10-year plan to address homelessness.
- 18.** Permanent housing is needed. Shelter bed-nights are being used because there is a lack of availability of permanent housing.
- 19.** Safe environment improves behavior.
- 20.** The agencies are prioritizing families with children.
- 21.** It takes so long for approval of housing subsidies that people give up.