ECLEG OCT11'12 AM10:27

Opening Doors: Buffalo and Erie County Community Plan to End Homelessness

Executive Summary

A PROJECT OF THE
Homeless Alliance of Western New York

"Ending homelessness does not mean that nobody will become homeless, but that effective systems will be in place to help people become housed again rapidly."

– NAN ROMAN
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

During the administration of President George W. Bush, communities around the country were encouraged to develop 10 Year Plans to End Homelessness. Erie County and Buffalo through the Homeless Alliance of Western New York, responded to the nationally unified effort by releasing their Prevention, Resources Independence, Services and Maintenance (PRISM) Plan in 2006. President Bush also reinvigorated the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) in 2003 in order to coordinate Federal efforts to end homelessness. In 2003 President Bush called for attempting to end chronic homelessness, recognizing the cost savings associated with this effort.

In 2010, under the guidance of President Barack Obama, USICH released Opening Doors, the first federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. Communities around the country were encouraged to review their plans and to align them with the federal goals.

In response to this federal effort, the Homeless Alliance of Western New York has again led the effort in Erie County and Buffalo to align our local goals with nationally proven best practices, the latest research and the federal Opening Doors plan.

This Executive Summary is just a snap shot of what needs to be done to accomplish the goal of ending homelessness. Everyone, especially elected officials and high level administrators, is encouraged to read the entire document to fully understand what this community needs to accomplish if we are to end homelessness.

Executive Summary

Erie County Community Checklist to End Homelessness:

1) First and foremost, we must inspire the community and government to end all types of homelessness. We are doomed to fail unless there is a concerted effort by all parties: government, non-profits and the private sector, towards this goal. Which public official will be the champion of this issue? Who in the private sector will step forward? The Homeless Alliance of WNY is prepared to lead the non-profit sector but we cannot do it alone.

2) Ending homelessness will take a collaborative effort. A regional Interagency Council on Homelessness should be established in order to coordinate available resources.

3) 58% of renters in Buffalo and 52% in Erie County are paying more than 30% of their income for rent, putting too many people at the brink of homelessness. More affordable rental units are needed in Buffalo and Erie County.

4) There is a shortage of Single Room Occupancies (SRO) and one (1) bedroom apartments for low income individuals. We need at least 500 SRO and/or one bedroom units at affordable prices.

5) It is a proven fact that providing Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) to the chronically homeless individuals is more cost effective than doing nothing. We are estimating that there would be a cost savings of $3.8 million per year if the chronically homeless were housed. The low demand Housing First concept is a nationally proven best practice model to house the chronically homeless. Four hundred (400) Housing First units are needed to end chronic homelessness.

6) Erie County needs more Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers to end veteran's homelessness and needs to be awarded Support Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) funds to prevent veteran homelessness. No veteran should suffer the trauma of homelessness.

7) All Public Housing Authorities (PHA's) in Erie County need to assist in the efforts to end homelessness. As the largest PHA in Erie County, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) should be at the forefront to lead all others.

Executive Summary

8) As poverty spreads further into the suburban and rural communities, improved access to services and housing options must be increased.

9) Poverty is the root cause of homelessness. The availability and access to living wage jobs is paramount to the efforts to fight poverty and end homelessness.

10) Erie County could see significant cost savings and provide better service to the homeless by using data to target the most vulnerable people for assistance. They can also be a key partner in developing a Single Point of Entry/Common Assessment for the homeless population. The City of Buffalo can also see cost savings by assisting in identifying the homeless population and by encouraging the development of affordable rental housing. The County and City can encourage the Private/Public partnership needed to develop this housing.

Executive Summary

Why is an update to Erie County's plan needed?

Prevention, Resources, Independence through housing, Services and Maintenance (PRISM), the Buffalo and Erie County ten year plan to end homelessness was introduced to the public in 2006. In the same year, the U.S. Census Bureau, in conjunction with the American Community Survey (ACS), released data on the status of poverty in Buffalo. The data painted Buffalo as one of the poorest cities in the United States. Though efforts and progress have been made since then, many changes in the social and economic sphere have taken place. The 2010-2011 homeless annual report data chronicled those changes; last year there were roughly 5,050 homeless individuals in Erie County. Eighteen percent (18%) were children under the age of 18 and forty percent (40%) were homeless for the first time.

In 2009, Congress enacted the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act. This legislation reauthorized the McKinney-Vento homeless assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The HEARTH Act shifts some of the emphasis in the HUD portfolio of homeless assistance programs. The HEARTH Act required the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) to develop a federal strategic plan to end homelessness, a plan that embraces economic and social changes that are affecting local communities. That plan, Opening Doors, was released in early 2010. The Homeless Alliance took cognizance of the changes and it is for this reason that we are updating PRISM.

The Homeless Alliance of Western New York (HAWNY) recognized the need to update PRISM, the ten year plan to end homelessness, to align with Opening Doors and plan for full implementation of the HEARTH Act by:

- Continuing to update data that reflects economic and societal changes since 2006;
- Completing a gap analysis;
- Assessing if the housing inventory is adequate to meet the needs of all homeless populations;
- Advocating for funding;
- Educating the stakeholders and the general population on homelessness and related issues;
- Strengthening collaboration within the continuum; and
- Ensuring that federal homeless funding in Buffalo and Erie County is maintained.

Executive Summary

The underlying theme is that the Homeless Alliance needs to encourage and promote partnership initiatives centered on a collaborative and coordinated continuum of care approach to addressing homeless prevention, addressing immediate homeless situations, and reducing recidivism for individuals and families. The end goal that underscores this entire plan is the elimination of homelessness in Erie County.

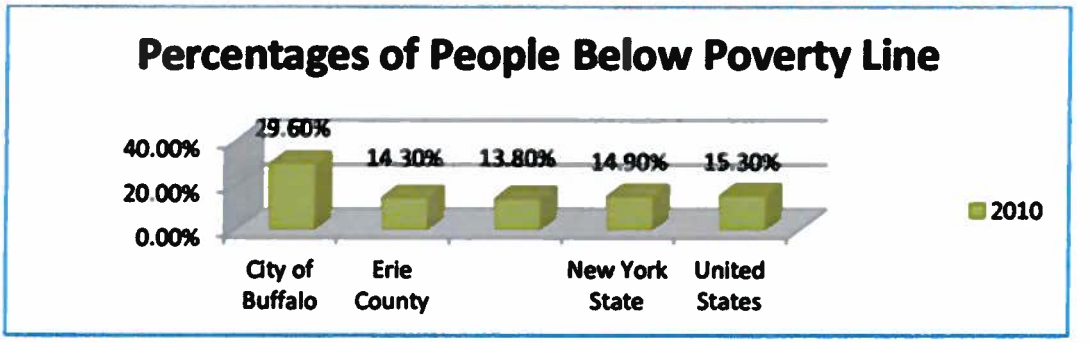
Poverty as a Root Cause of Homelessness

The root cause of homelessness in Buffalo and Erie County is undoubtedly poverty and the effect it has on individuals as well as families.

- In 2010, the poverty rate for city of Buffalo was nearly 29.6% and the rest of Erie County was 14.3%.
- The concentration of poverty is very concerning. As of January 2007, 78.4% of Erie County residents receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) lived in the city of Buffalo.
- 46% of children in Buffalo live in poverty, according to the 2010 Census Data on Child Poverty in US cities.
- The single largest causes of poverty are jobs that do not offer a living wage.
- Housing is one of the largest expenses for low income households. 58% of renters in the city of Buffalo, where the median rent is $646, and 52% of renters in Erie County are paying over 30% of their income in rent.
- According to the 2010 Census, 37% of people living below the poverty level line in Buffalo were unemployed, compared to a national average of 32.9%. Contrary to public opinion, the majority (59.6%) of people who live in poverty are employed.

There are simply too many people living in poverty, a lack of living wage jobs and too many people paying more than 30% of the income for rent. These factors, as well as others, leave those living in poverty on the brink of homelessness. If a person loses even a fraction of their income due to illness, reduced hours at work or family crisis, it can begin a cycle of unpaid expenses that can result in homelessness.

Executive Summary

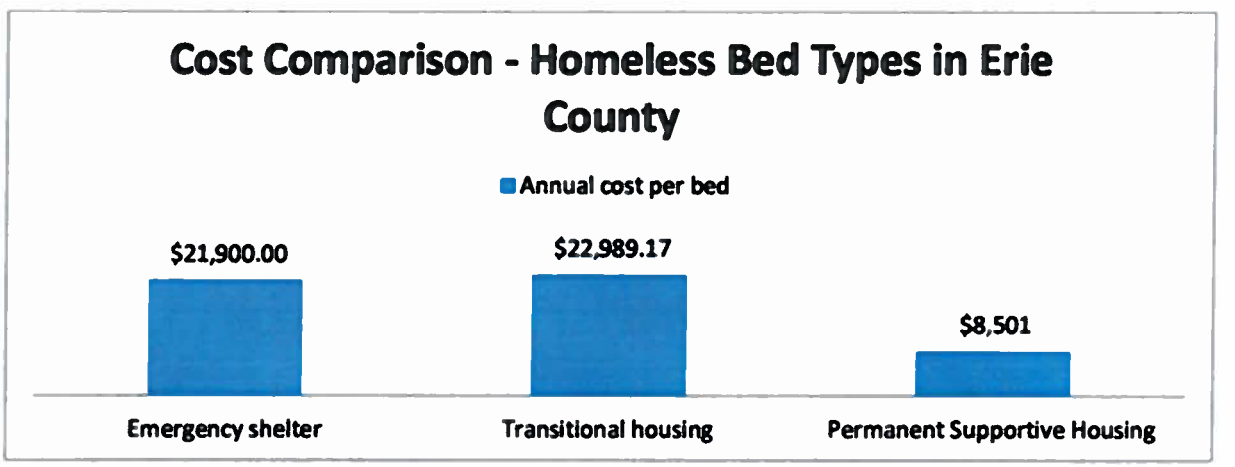


Source: Partnership for the Public Good, Buffalo NY. "Poverty in Buffalo-Niagara"

Cost of Homelessness

Research conducted over the past two decades across the nation has shown that the cost of providing permanent housing, even with supportive services, is less expensive than the cost of shelter, a hospital bed, or a prison cell. For example in an Erie County Department of Social Services (ECDSS) funded emergency shelter, it costs $60 per night in a shelter for a single mother with a child; $1,800 if they remain in a shelter for 30 days. This is much more than what would be needed to place this family in decent housing in Erie County.

The graph below provides the annual cost of beds in the Erie County homeless system by type of program. This clearly demonstrates that placing homeless persons into permanent housing as quickly as possible could save the community a lot of money. Research has made an impact on policies; HUD has increased resources for Rapid Re-Housing Programs.



Source: Homeless Alliance of WNY

Executive Summary

Cost of Chronic Homelessness

Further, researchers across the nation have been putting incredible efforts into the cost analysis of homelessness. This research has focused on certain subpopulations of the homeless, like the chronically homeless, a small percentage (between 10 – 15%) of the homeless population uses more than 50% of the resources. These studies had a substantial impact on policies, at both the national and local level that have resulted in dedicating resources to develop permanent supportive housing especially those that have used a Housing First/harm reduction approach.

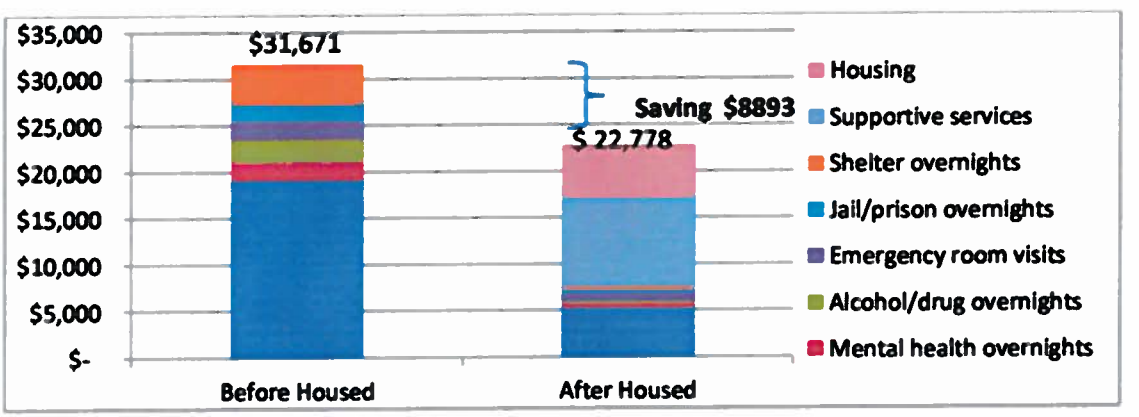
In the Erie County CoC, there are three (3) programs that exclusively serve chronically homeless persons. The average cost per client is $15,656 per year, and includes both housing and supportive services costs.

Across the country, studies have proven that it is more cost effective to house the chronically homeless rather than leave them on the street. A study[1] from Rhode Island shows that housed chronically homeless can save $8,893 per client each year. This program serves the chronically homeless population that has similar cost and size to our programs.

In 2011, there were 436 chronically homeless individuals entered into HMIS. Placing the chronically homeless into housing could potentially save the community $3,877,348 per year.

The County would need to invest some of these savings to provide further street outreach workers and matching funds to accomplish any savings. For further reading on the cost benefits of housing the chronically homeless see Appendix iii on page 74.

Costs of Chronic Homelessness in Rhode Island



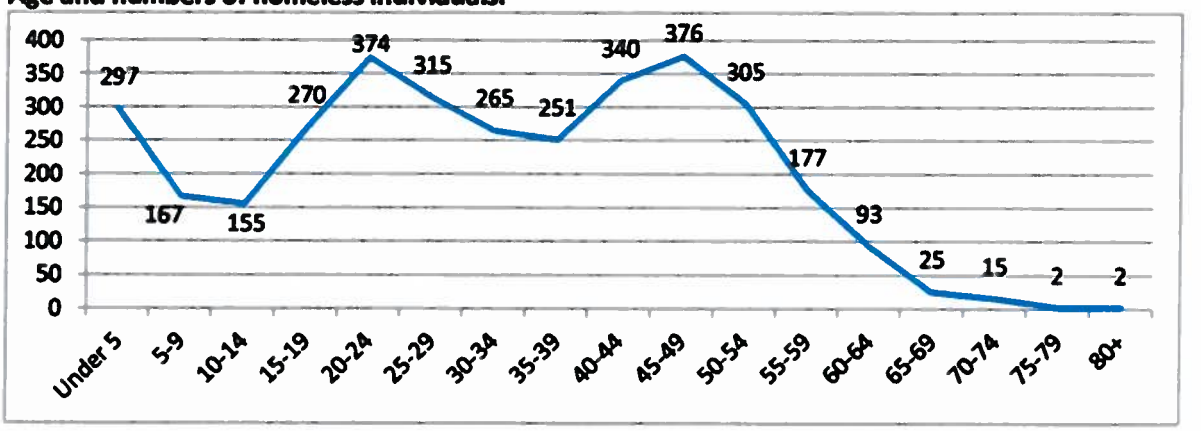
[1] Hirsch, E. & Glasser, I. (2007 August 1). Rhode Island's Housing First Program First Year Evaluation. http://www.muni.org/Departments/health/Documents/Rhode%20Island%20Housing%20First%20Evaluation.pdf

Executive Summary

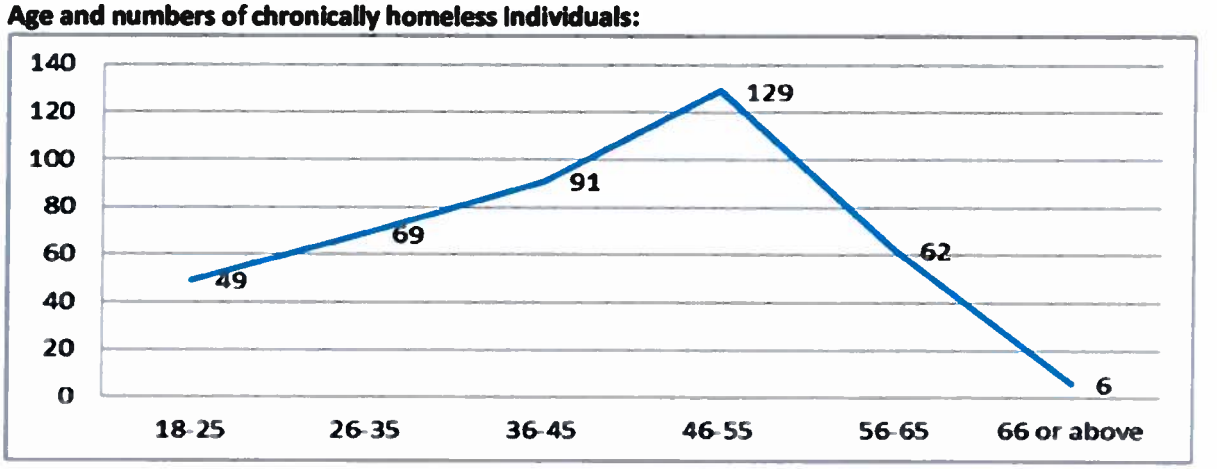
Aging and the Cost of Homelessness

Looking at HMIS data for 2011, there were two peaks in the age distribution of homeless clients: ages 20-24 and ages 45-49. Based on previous research cited by Culhane (2009), the estimated life expectancy for adults who are chronically homeless have a life expectancy of 62 years. In Buffalo, this means that roughly 376 homeless individuals will be coming close to their life expectancy within the next 10-15 years. As people age and approach the end of life, chronic disease management issues increase in addition to rising health care costs. Being able to manage health issues is not always possible in a homeless setting, leading to rising hospitalization and nursing home costs. Taking care of those whose health care costs are relatively low today through appropriate housing and support will help take advantage of significant cost avoidance opportunities.

Age and numbers of homeless individuals:



Age and numbers of chronically homeless individuals:



Source: Homeless Alliance of WNY

Executive Summary

Erie County

The County of Erie is a major provider of homeless services through the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Environment and Planning.

The Department of Social Services placed close to 1,900 people into emergency housing in 2011 while the Erie County Department of Mental Health served 356 people while utilizing 59% of the $8 million Continuum of Care funding to provide Permanent Supportive Housing for the homeless. Environment and Planning will receive $239,000 through the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) for shelters, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing.

Erie County could potentially save millions of dollars by effectively using data to target the most vulnerable and high cost users of homeless services, Medicaid services and jails to provide the clients with coordinated services so they achieve stable housing (see the Cost of Homeless Section). The high cost users of services will most likely be the chronically and unsheltered homeless.

In an article in the Seattle Times from September 1, 2012, Seattle Continuum of Care lead Bill Block said, *"We have teams that address the high utilizers of jails and hospitals. Our client-care coordination targets housing to them. Comparing six months before housing to six months with housing, jail days dropped 65 percent, sobering-center days dropped 93 percent and psychiatric-hospital days dropped 85 percent. One thing we've shown conclusively is that stable housing is essential to recovery of all types and at all levels."*

In order to achieve any cost savings, the Erie County Executive and Legislature would have to make an initial investment in the personnel to analyze data and coordinate services.

Services were coordinated with the Rapid Re-housing programs under development by the City of Buffalo, Erie County and Town of Tonawanda. Further Rapid Re-housing funds are available through the Continuum of Care that requires a 25% funding match that could be provided with ESG funds however, a Continuum of Care application would need a unit of local government or Public Housing Authority to administer the rental assistance.

Executive Summary

In order to implement any type of coordinated "system" a thorough analysis of available data is necessary. In a show of cooperation and coordination, the Department of Social Services has recently agreed to provide HMIS data to the Homeless Alliance. This development will allow the identification of repeat users of homeless services. This data would then have to be cross checked with high users of other high cost services like medical and corrections in order to achieve the discussed cost savings.

Additionally, the new HEARTH Act and Emergency Solutions Grant regulations require communities to develop a Single Point of Entry/Common Assessment as the first step in engaging the homeless population (this is discussed in detail later in this plan). The County through the Department of Social Services will be a key partner in the development of this new "system."

The recent advances in Medicaid reform are based upon the same premise of stable housing being the basis for cost savings. Health Homes, New York State's Medicaid Reform effort would be an ideal future partner for these coordinated services. Governor Andrew Cuomo has included $60 million in the 2012-13 New York State budget for the provision of Permanent Supportive Housing in recognition of the cost savings that could be achieved with stable housing.

The County and the city can encourage the development of the public private partnership needed to build affordable rental units for the homeless.

Executive Summary

City of Buffalo

Due to the concentration of poverty within the city limits, a large portion of the homeless population is centered in the City of Buffalo and as a result the emergency shelters are located in Buffalo. Most of unsheltered homeless also live in various camps and abandoned buildings in Buffalo.

According to the Buffalo Fire Arson Squad, there are at least 10-15 fires per year that are attributed to squatters living in abandoned homes simply attempting to stay warm during the cold winter months. The City of Buffalo could see a significant cost savings in if those living in the abandoned homes could be permanently housed. Each fire requires a minimum of 2 Engines companies, 1 Ladder company, and the Battalion Chief. The savings in prevention of injuries to firefighters and property damage to adjacent homes would be difficult to calculate but is still a factor to be considered in the benefits to housing the homeless.

In addition, in the cities that have conducted Cost of Homeless studies, all have found a reduction in the arrests and time spent in the correctional system by the provision of Permanent Supportive Housing to the homeless. One could conclude there would be a corresponding reduction in police costs if there are less homeless people getting arrested, thus freeing up valuable resources for other police services.

Any potential cost savings would only be achieved if the chronically homeless were targeted for Permanent Supportive Housing.

Additionally, the City of Buffalo is the largest recipient of HUD HOME funds meant to provide housing options for low and moderate income families. Additional HOME funds should be directed towards the development of more affordable rental housing. The City should participate in the National Low Income Housing Coalition campaign to dedicate 30% of all government assisted housing to be dedicated to those people at or below 30% or the area median income.

Executive Summary

Plan Guiding Principles:

a) No one chooses or wants to be homeless.
b) Poverty is the root cause of homelessness.
c) No family, individual, child or veteran should be homeless.
d) Homeless people need stable and affordable housing.
e) We can end long term homelessness by providing Permanent Supportive Housing which has been proven to be more cost effective than doing nothing.
f) We can develop a better system to assist people when they experience difficult housing situations.
g) The discussion must start with how we *can* accomplish the goals outlined in the plan rather than why we *cannot*.

Vision

Develop and build a collaborative and comprehensive Continuum of Care that is consistent with the federal goals of ending homelessness.

Goals

- Finish the job of ending chronic homelessness by 2017.
- Prevent and end homelessness among veterans by 2017.
- Prevent and end homelessness for families, youth, and children by 2022.
- Set a path to ending all types of homelessness.

Executive Summary

Objectives

There are total 13 objectives and 56 strategies discussed in this ten year plan.

	Chronic	Veterans	Families	Youth	Rural Homeless
Objective 1: Build public will to end homelessness through increasing awareness and knowledge.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 2: Promote collaborative efforts.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 3: Maximize effectiveness of local homeless Continuum of Care and full implementation of HEARTH Act.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 4: Increase availability of safe, adequate and affordable permanent housing for all populations in Erie County.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 5: Increase Permanent Supportive Housing units.	x	x	x	x	
Objective 6: Provide homeless housing options for rural homeless population.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 7: Improve access to education and increase meaningful and sustainable employment for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 8: Reduce financial vulnerability.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 9 Integrate primary and behavioral health care services with homeless assistance programs and housing to reduce people's vulnerability to and the impacts of homelessness.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 10: Prevent family and youth homelessness			x	x	x
Objective 11: Strengthen the capacity of Bas-Net to meet the expanded data collection, reporting and research needs.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 12: Transform current homeless services to focus on preventing homelessness and rapidly returning people who experience homelessness to stable housing.	x	x	x	x	x
Objective 13: Improve provider understanding of requirements for access to and receipt of services.	x	x	x	x	x

Executive Summary

Structure of the Plan

The Plan is divided into four sections:

Introduction: This section describes the reasoning behind the update of this plan. It also provides a glimpse of the underlying causes of homelessness in Erie County and the cost implications associated with homelessness in general.

Homelessness in Buffalo and Erie County: This section provides discussions of the current state of homelessness in Buffalo and Erie County. The majority of the discussions are derived from community focus group sessions that were conducted in the spring of 2012.

Objectives and Strategies: The plan has thirteen (13) objectives, fifty six (56) strategies, and five (5) themes. Our objectives are designed in alignment with the theme of the federal government strategic plan to end homelessness in order to specify how the strategy will work to address the needs and gaps identified by our community.

HEARTH Act Implementation: The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act implementation is the driving force in the implementation of many of the strategies outlined in this plan. The HEARTH act plan implementation will focus on retooling the crisis response system in our community based on national best practice models, rapid re-housing, housing first, coordinated entry system, and use of the common assessment tool.

Executive Summary

Homeless Alliance of Western New York

The Homeless Alliance of Western New York is a not-for profit independent membership organization responsible for facilitating dialogue between government, private sectors, community organizations, foundation sectors, and members of the general public to combat homelessness. Working with these entities to minimize services gaps and maximize assistance available to homeless persons, the Alliance takes primary responsibility for coordinating the Erie County Continuum of Care (CoC) application for the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Annual Assistance grant competition which brings in $10 million annually into Erie County community for homeless housing services.

The Alliance is also the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) lead agency for Erie County and is responsible for conducting research in order to better understand the nature and extent of local homelessness.

Homeless Alliance Staff

The planning, research and writing of this plan was made possible by the Homeless Alliance staff, namely, Dale Zuchlewski, Executive Director, Connie Sanderson, Continuum of Care Coordinator, Suckie Smith, Director of Operations, Rebecca Detlef, HMIS Coordinator, Kexin Ma, Research Coordinator, Michael Knott, VISTA Member, Alecia Zimmerman, Community Analyst, Andrew Gaber, PHD candidate and former HAWNY Community Analyst Assistant, Megan Bingham, VISTA Member, and Dr. Warren Marcus, Alliance consultant.

Homeless Alliance Board of Directors

Chris Syracuse, Board Chair, Kenneth Turner, Karen Carman, Carolyn Hillman, Patrick Henry, Mike Henry, Janet Meiselman, Glenda Washington, Penny Selmonsky, Rachel Rzayav, and Peter Vukelic.