Holes in the Safety Net:
Mainstream Systems and Homelessness
Executive Summary

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This report was prepared in consultation with the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation by Katharine Gale Consulting.

TO THE READER:

Previous research has made it clear that government-funded programs for low-income persons ("mainstream systems") can play a key role in the effort to prevent and end homelessness nationwide. This report, developed by the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, analyzes how homeless persons currently use mainstream systems and how mainstream systems now serve — and don't serve — their homeless clients.

The interviews and research reveal that, in fact, homeless persons fail to access many services to which they are entitled, and that mainstream systems are not well-organized to meet the needs of homeless persons. This report documents a multitude of reasons for the failure of homeless persons and mainstream service providers to connect. Some of these reasons have to do with the condition of homelessness itself, which may make it difficult, for instance, to store medications provided by a health services program, to travel to widely dispersed treatment or service agencies and organizations, or even to determine what relief may be available. Other reasons for the failure to connect have to do with the mainstream systems, such as fragmentation of services, different standards for access to various programs and, perhaps most importantly, failure of the systems to view stability of housing as a measure of their own success.

Our goal in issuing this report is to provide additional data and insights that can guide our own foundation and the philanthropic community in identifying strategies and initiatives that successfully address the problems in this area and target our efforts and funding accordingly. We believe the report helps to clarify ways in which philanthropic support can help the homeless population and mainstream systems connect. It presents a vision in which philanthropy can leverage its contributions by using them to improve the impact of mainstream systems on the homeless population. We hope it will assist you, as it will us, in developing effective programs in our collaborative efforts to end homelessness.

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The Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation's previous research, and that of other groups such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness, show that any successful effort to end homelessness must include a combination of services, income supports and housing. The same research tells us that the most important but under-utilized source of income, housing and services to people who are homeless or at risk for homelessness is government-funded programs designed to meet the needs of low-income people ("mainstream systems").

Mainstream systems can help both to prevent people's homelessness and address their needs after they become homeless. It is critical to obtain data that profiles the current interaction between mainstream systems and homeless persons, because such information is a vital component in developing strategies and informing planning for the future. The Schwab Foundation has commissioned this report to:

★ explore what prevents mainstream programs from serving the homeless population

★ summarize strategies being tested nationwide to maximize mainstream services to homeless populations, including ways that mainstream services can prevent homelessness

★ identify the ways philanthropic funding could assist mainstream systems in becoming effective agents in nationwide efforts to end homelessness

Mainstream Systems

Mainstream systems are publicly-funded programs that provide services, housing and income supports to poor persons whether they are homeless or not. They include programs providing welfare, health care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment and veterans' assistance. People who experience homelessness are almost always clients of these systems, yet mainstream programs are not realizing their potential to be a major player in ending homelessness. As the National Alliance to End Homelessness points out in its Ten Year Plan, mainstream systems have deferred to homeless assistance programs rather than joining forces with them, thereby evading the cost and responsibility of helping their most disadvantaged clients. This must change because the resources dispersed by mainstream programs are an indispensable component of success. Only when the homeless and those at risk for homelessness fully utilize the resources of mainstream systems and available housing supports, will stable housing situations be within their grasp. This report identifies what needs to change to achieve full utilization of mainstream services and income supports. Change will occur by bringing mainstream systems into the planning process for ending homelessness.

Barriers to Service from Mainstream Programs

The report details how the condition of homelessness itself makes it difficult to access benefits of mainstream programs. The many possible barriers that have been identified include a lack of transportation to service sites, difficulty in obtaining information by phone or by mail and the time required to find shelter and food on a daily basis. In addition, the report documents barriers that exist within the agencies and programs. These range from the fragmentation of services and a lack of accountability in serving homeless people to the absence of incentives and resources which are required to render appropriate services.

Strategies

Already, programs at state and national levels are attempting to dismantle barriers that prevent homeless persons from availing themselves of mainstream services. This report describes a number of these efforts, which encompass such varied strategies as eviction prevention/housing retention programs and the development of respite/recuperative care facilities for persons too ill for shelters. The report also presents data regarding the effectiveness and outcomes of those initiatives which have been evaluated

A Role for Philanthropy

Because government provides the funding and enacts the regulations that govern mainstream systems, it must lead the effort to make these systems responsive to homeless populations and accountable for homelessness. However, there are many areas in which foundations can play a pivotal role, for example, in educating both clients who need to learn about eligibility for various services and mainstream agencies that must learn how to coordinate their services.

Funds are needed to staff collaborative programs among agencies, to provide incentives for collaborating, and to fill gaps in coverage while people wait to have eligibility for various programs confirmed. Foundations also could play a role in funding and disseminating the growing body of research which demonstrates the savings that could be realized by making delivery of mainstream systems to homeless groups more effective.

Perhaps the most fundamental impact foundations could have would be to partner with mainstream service providers to plan for their new role. Done well, such planning could transform mainstream service providers. Historically, they have not taken responsibility for homelessness. In the future, they could be on the front line of preventing it.