

Aid to long-term homeless shifts to 'housing first'



Mario Berninzoni looks through the reams of paperwork at the Arundel House of Hope related to chronically homeless Glen Burnie man Clifford Nickalo. (By Joshua McKerrow, Staff, Capital Gazette)



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When Anne Arundel County's winter relief shelters close Monday for the end of the season, about 100 people will be back on the streets.

The county Department of Social Services recently identified nearly 300 men and women like Clifford Lee Nickalo in the county - people who have been without a home for more than a year or who have had at least four bouts of homelessness in the past three years.

While these people make up less than 20 percent of the overall homeless population, they are considered among the most vulnerable and costly to the social support system.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates this group uses nearly 50 percent of available resources for the homeless.

Mario Berninzoni, executive director of Arundel House of Hope, said the approach to long-term homelessness has recently shifted. Many service providers are no longer treating permanent housing as a reward only to those who have sobered up, gotten jobs or fixed other underlying problems.

"The idea of the program is to give them housing first and see if those other behaviors can change," Berninzoni said. "Don't try to make them jump through hoops to get them housed."

A 2006 pilot study in Portland, Ore., found that 35 chronically homeless individuals each used more than \$42,000 in public resources per year. After permanent housing, they used less than \$26,000.

Evidence shows it might have worked for Nickalo, too.

While he was in the winter relief shelter a year ago, Nickalo went to the emergency room twice. When he was on the streets, he went at least 80 times in the previous three years, caseworkers said, sometimes using hospitals for food, beds and baths.

When Nickalo died, he had at least \$230,000 in unpaid medical bills, caseworkers said.

"What happens to that \$230,000? We all pay it. Those doctors still got paid, the nurses still got paid. All those things still cost, it just costs the community," Berninzoni said.

As part of a national campaign called 100,000 Homes, a local coalition of county and Annapolis agencies is working to find and place long-term homeless individuals.

In November they identified 55 people for whom they would seek housing this year. So far they've placed three, said Elizabeth Kinney, chairwoman of the campaign.

The coalition wants to assemble advocacy teams for each of the cases, but it needs funding for an employee to handle the administrative workload.

"It is the single biggest elephant in the room," Kinney said.

Social workers said they face opposition from citizens who don't want group homes and other housing for the chronically homeless near them.

Agency representatives say the needs are obvious: more landlords willing to provide leases to their clients, developers willing to build affordable housing and local public policy to require such results or provide incentives for them.

The [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#) has also adopted a goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. While local representatives said they still have a way to go, but are making progress on reducing the numbers of homeless.

Craig Cook, a VA supervisor, said the agency's resources have changed dramatically over the years. In 2001 the Baltimore area had two outreach workers; today more than 70 employees are working in veterans programming.

The agency has teams that go into tent cities. When it gets calls from citizens about a homeless person seen on the street, it will send someone to talk to the individual.

The agency has also worked to become more accessible. Slight changes such as asking clients whether they have ever served in the military - rather than whether they're veterans - can make the difference in reaching some individuals, officials said.

Veterans might have misconceptions that the agency is only for soldiers who have been disabled or were in combat. Or they may have negative feelings about the military.

The challenge, Cook said, is that no one receives assistance unless he or she wants it.

"It's 100 percent volunteer. We can't force a veteran to take anything they're not willing to," he said. "We have to really engage the veterans where they are and forge a relationship right there on the street."