

Issue Brief

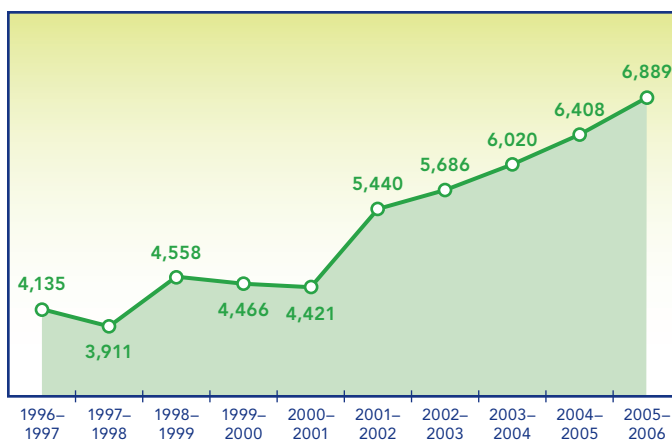


Ending Homelessness in Rhode Island: The Supportive Housing Approach

The need for safe, affordable housing cuts a wide demographic swath in Rhode Island—across cities, towns, and rural areas, younger and older people, families and individuals. People who are chronically homeless face unique barriers to finding and keeping affordable homes. This Issue Brief discusses one effective solution—known as “supportive housing”—to the challenges that confront this population.

Homelessness is at an all-time high in Rhode Island. Last year, 6,900 men, women, and children slept in a homeless shelter. Almost one-fifth of the sheltered population are considered the “chronically” or “long-term” homeless—that is, those who have been homeless multiple times over a period of years or for years at a time.

Homelessness on the rise in Rhode Island



○ Shelter Clients

Source: Rhode Island Emergency Food & Shelter Board Annual Report 2005-2006

What Is Supportive Housing?

Put simply, supportive housing is a combination of affordable housing and services that help people live independent, stable, and productive lives. People with a variety of special needs benefit from supportive housing opportunities in Rhode Island, including those who are homeless.

Many of those who are chronically homeless live in poverty, suffer from severe mental illness and/or substance abuse, have physical disabilities, or face other barriers to finding and keeping housing. These problems combine to increase the likelihood that such individuals will return to the street or temporary shelters.

Supportive housing aims to permanently break the cycle of homelessness. According to the Corporation for Supportive Housing, a supportive housing unit is a place where the tenant:

- pays no more than 30% of household income for rent, often receiving rental assistance from a housing subsidy program;
- has access to comprehensive services, including medical and wellness, mental health, substance use management and recovery, vocational and employment, and money management services; and
- has a lease, and there are no limits on a person’s length of tenancy as long as he or she abides by the conditions of the lease or agreement.

Supportive housing can be located in one apartment complex or scattered across a community. The units are typically located close to shopping, transportation, and other services, in order to foster independence and integrate residents into the broader community.

How Supportive Housing Makes a Difference

Research increasingly documents the effectiveness of supportive housing in improving tenants' access to health care, health status, and employment:¹

- **Access to health care:** Supportive housing has led to an increase in tenants' use of preventive health services, a 50% decrease in emergency room visits and inpatient days, and an 80% decrease in emergency detoxification services.
- **Health status:** A one-year follow-up study of a substance abuse treatment program in Minneapolis determined that 90% of those living in supporting housing have remained sober—compared to 57% of those living independently or in halfway houses.
- **Employment:** When employment services are provided as part of a supportive housing program, tenants have seen a 40% increase in employment, a 50% increase in earned income, and a decrease in dependence on entitlements.

The Costs and Savings of Supportive Housing

In addition to improving the lives of individuals, a key goal of supportive housing is to reduce the need for costly public services—including emergency health care, public safety, and criminal justice—that the chronically homeless use heavily. The total cost of homelessness is difficult to assess, but the numbers below suggest the financial toll:²

- **More hospitalizations:** The rate of psychiatric hospitalization for the homeless has been estimated at more than 100 times the average.
- **Longer hospitalizations:** Homeless people spend an average of four days longer per hospital visit than comparable non-homeless people—an extra cost of approximately \$2,414 per hospitalization.
- **Expensive prison beds:** Nationally, more than 10% of those coming in and out of prisons and jail are homeless in the months before their incarceration. The average annual cost of housing an inmate at Rhode Island's Adult Correctional Institution (ACI) is \$39,000.
- **Emergency shelter costs:** The annual cost of a shelter bed funded by HUD's Emergency Shelter Grants program is about \$8,000 more than the average annual cost of a federal housing subsidy.

Given the high costs of homelessness, it's no surprise that the latest data suggest that the cost of providing permanent supportive housing is about the same as (or less than) the cost of allowing individuals to remain chronically homeless³ (see "What the Research Tells Us" below).

What the Research Tells Us

Three recent studies conclude that it costs roughly the same amount (or perhaps even less) to provide stable, supportive housing for someone as it does for that person to be homeless.

- In **New York City**, each unit of permanent supportive housing saved \$16,282 per year in public costs for shelter, health care, mental health, and criminal justice services. The savings almost entirely offset the \$17,277 cost of the supportive housing.
- A **Denver** supportive housing program reduced public costs by \$15,773 per person per year, more than offsetting the \$13,400 annual cost of the housing.
- In **Portland, OR**, a supportive housing program realized a public cost savings in its first year of 36% for each individual enrolled in the program.

From "Supportive Housing Is Cost Effective," National Alliance to End Homelessness, January 2007.

Supportive Housing in Rhode Island

The state's "Five-Year Strategic Housing Plan: 2006–2010" identifies supportive housing as critical to the state's overall housing strategy. Beyond serving as a primary tool in Rhode Island's efforts to end homelessness, supportive housing programs are helping youth in foster care, people with disabilities, the elderly, and those just getting out of prison to live independent, productive lives.

The supportive housing model has been implemented in sites throughout the state:

- The **House of Hope Community Development Corporation in Warwick** offers a variety of supportive housing opportunities, including apartments for families, a group home for homeless and disabled women, and efficiency apartments for people who have experienced chronic homelessness.

- **Family Resources Community Action** and **NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley** have partnered for years to provide permanent supportive apartments for individuals and families in **Woonsocket**.
- The **Newport County Community Mental Health Center (NCCMHC)** and **Church Community Housing Corporation** partnered on Freedom Apartments, home to twelve individuals with disabilities. NCCMHC provides ongoing services to the residents.
- **Welcome House of South County** offers permanent supportive apartments in **Peace Dale** through the Thresholds Program, which funds the development of housing for people with long-term mental illness.
- **Crossroads Rhode Island** offers 16 supportive apartments for people who have been homeless in its main **Providence** facility. Residents can access a range of services, from a hot evening meal to health care to vocational training.

Supportive housing is funded through a number of programs, including the Neighborhood Opportunities Program, HOME, Thresholds, HUD's Supportive Housing Program, and Shelter Plus Care. Often, as with the Housing First Rhode Island Program (see "Case Study" below), service dollars are combined with existing housing subsidies.

CASE STUDY: Housing First Rhode Island

The State of Rhode Island, along with the United Way of Rhode Island and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, has launched perhaps the most comprehensive supportive housing program in Rhode Island to-date. Funded by the state and United Way, the Housing First Rhode Island Program provides supportive services for up to 50 individuals.

The program targets chronically homeless individuals who have severe mental illness and/or substance abuse problems. Individuals are placed in homes within weeks of enrollment. The program is premised on the "housing first" philosophy: that interventions and social service supports are more effective *after* individuals are living in their own housing rather than emergency shelters or transitional housing, and that, once in permanent housing, people can begin to regain the confidence and control over their lives they lost when they became homeless.

In addition to not requiring that individuals "clean up" in order to qualify, the program provides individualized support services that address the precise issues that residents are facing. The program is also committed to providing continuous services—so that, even if an individual fails to abide by a lease and is forced to leave a particular home, he or she does not "fail out" of the supportive housing program as a whole.

The program was launched in March 2006, placing individuals in rental units (many privately owned) throughout the community. Participants have been chronically homeless, on average, for eight or more years. While it is too early to assess the savings to the state, the program is working. Turnover is extraordinarily low. Only three individuals have been removed from homes.

Footnotes:

1. Data from "Supportive Housing Works to End Homelessness," Corporation for Supportive Housing, <http://www.csh.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageID=344>, accessed April 4, 2007.
2. All data from "The Cost of Homelessness," National Alliance to End Homelessness, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/tools/tenyearplan/cost>, accessed April 11, 2007.
3. "Supportive Housing Is Cost Effective," National Alliance to End Homelessness, January 2007.

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NEXT ISSUE BRIEF:

The state's Neighborhood Opportunities Program (NOP) helps revitalize neighborhoods and create affordable homes for low-income families, people with disabilities, and those who are homeless. Since 2001, NOP has assisted in the production of over 1,000 affordable homes across Rhode Island, including many permanent supportive housing units.

This home—developed by the House of Hope Community Development Corporation with Neighborhood Opportunities Program funds—provides permanent supportive housing to a family in Warwick.