

What unites us all, what powers us all, is the vision of a society where everyone has a place that they can call home – safe, decent, affordable places in healthy, economically sound and supportive communities... At the center of everything we do is the idea of individual empowerment, of helping people to help themselves by getting access to the tools and means to achieve.

Robert Hohler
Executive Director, Melville Charitable Trust
2004

Introduction

In June 2010, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) issued the first federal comprehensive plan to prevent and end homelessness. This plan, *Opening Doors*, provides a road map for joint action by 19 federal agencies and local and state partners to align housing, health, education and human services to prevent Americans from experiencing homelessness. As the most far-reaching and ambitious plan to end homelessness in our nation's history, *Opening Doors* calls for a fundamental shift in how the federal government and communities across the country respond to homelessness.

Central to this shift is greater emphasis on helping people secure and retain safe, stable housing. From years of practice and research, we know that housing is an essential platform for human and community development. Stable housing is the foundation upon which people build their lives – absent a safe, decent, affordable place to live, it is next to impossible to achieve good health, positive educational outcomes, or reach one's economic potential. For many people living in poverty, the lack of stable housing leads to costly cycling through crisis-driven systems like foster care, emergency rooms, psychiatric hospitals, emergency shelters, domestic violence shelters, detox centers, and jails. By the same token, stable housing provides an ideal launching pad for the delivery of health care and other social services focused on improving life outcomes for individuals and families. More recently, researchers have focused on housing stability as an important ingredient for the success of children and youth in school.

Connecticut has made remarkable strides in advancing housing-based solutions to homelessness – most significantly through the creation of close to 4,500 units of permanent supportive housing, most of it targeted to people with disabilities who have long histories of homelessness. But there is much more work to be done, and on a broader scale. In 2010, 13,401 people in Connecticut used emergency shelters at some point during the course of the year; one out of seven was a child. The challenge offered by *Opening Doors* is to address concurrently the needs of the variety of households who face homelessness every day, including families with children, youth, Veterans, and chronically homeless adults.

Opening Doors is already forging new partnerships between agencies like HUD, HHS, Education, and the U.S. Department of Labor that will translate into new opportunities for states in addressing

homelessness. The *Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act*, passed by Congress in 2009, is also providing new incentives and guidance to local communities in re-organizing their homeless services. The landmark *Affordable Care Act* is providing new opportunities to enhance supportive housing services by expanding Medicaid eligibility to most low-income individuals under age 65 and by supporting demonstration projects to improve health care for vulnerable populations.

With preparation, Connecticut can take advantage of these and other opportunities to significantly move the needle on ending homelessness. With this in mind, the Partnership for Strong Communities, working in tandem with the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH), the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the Connecticut Housing Coalition, the Connecticut AIDS Resource Coalition, NAMI of Connecticut, and other leading intermediaries and advocates, has developed this framework named, *Opening Doors – Connecticut*. *Opening Doors - CT* has been a collaborative effort intended to engage, guide, and support the efforts of Connecticut government, communities, philanthropy, providers, and advocates in formulating and implementing strategies to prevent and end homelessness. The purpose of the effort is to foster change leading to deep impacts: substantial reductions in the number of people falling into homelessness, substantial reductions in the number of people returning to emergency shelters, and substantial reductions in the length of time people are homeless. In the last section of this document is a proposed re-structuring of the Reaching Home Campaign, which was launched in 2004 to build political and civic support for ending long-term homelessness through the expansion of supportive housing. This re-structuring is designed to ensure momentum for the broader effort, foster collaboration within and between the various sectors and systems that deliver needed services and work on solutions to prevent and end homelessness, and ensure that the issues and ideas presented in this framework are fully developed and implemented.

Opening Doors - CT kicked off in March 2011 with a series of six roundtable “listening sessions”, facilitated conversations among practitioners and policymakers in the fields of homeless services, health care, criminal justice, family and youth programs, community engagement, employment, and housing. In addition to these sessions, we invited broad input through an on-line survey. Through these means, over 250 stakeholders from across the state provided practical advice on effective Connecticut-based strategies for preventing and ending homelessness. We also examined the results of the extensive public comment provided to USICH in 2010 from stakeholders in the Northeast as part of the federal *Opening Doors* development. A summary of what we learned through this input process appears in Appendix A.

The second step in *Opening Doors - CT* was the development of this *Framework*, designed to provide a common understanding of the issues and a guide for devising effective strategies at the state and local level. The *Opening Doors - CT Framework* is, in a sense, an extension of the federal *Opening Doors*, building upon its work to recommend ideas that are more Connecticut-specific. The first section of this *Framework* summarizes what we know about homelessness in Connecticut, and includes a projection of housing needs among families, Veterans, and chronically homeless adults over the initial five year *Opening Doors* planning timeframe (2010-2015). The second section describes the current systems in place that significantly impact, or are impacted by, homelessness, and identifies what needs to change if we are to be successful in reaching our goals. This section also offers ideas for how we collectively organize as a state to undertake the work ahead.

The next step in Opening Doors - CT will be one of rolling up our collective sleeves and getting on with the hard business of making change. Going it alone is not an option. *Opening Doors* is rooted in the primacy of collaboration based on shared goals – across and within government; between the public and private sectors; across disparate systems such as housing, health care, behavioral health, workforce, and criminal justice; between providers of services at ground level; and, most of all, partnerships with the very people who are experiencing housing loss. That is why it is proposed that Reaching Home become the vehicle through which this work of collaboration proceeds, which is described more fully in this *Framework*.