Everyone Known to Someone:

A proposal to the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance to develop a network of local committees to reach and assist the homeless members of the communities to get services, find housing, be registered in the HMIS, and be counted during the PIT Count. By Stephen Marshall 09/10/2017

Preamble:

The vision of ending homelessness is a bold and audacious one; in the context of a society which uses hard-wall housing and property to promote security and stability, it proclaims for every person the right to security and stability, through housing that is safe and confers dignity - a right that has never previously been achieved in American history. Such an audacious goal deserves an audacious plan.

Constituency:

While our specific clientele is the group known as "the homeless", they are in fact barely distinguishable from the poor who are housed. Homelessness afflicts all poor intermittently, and many others of higher incomes. To end homelessness, we must look beyond the needs of the obviously homeless, to the realities of wealth, health, housing and educational insecurity and inequity. This plan invites members of the community to educate themselves on these subjects through their work.

Core Vision: Everyone is Known To Someone

Every homeless person in our county will be known to at least one other member of the community, who as a member of a local Everyone Known to Someone Committee, is a human face from the community, inviting the homeless person into a fuller relationship with the other members of the community, its resources, and the opportunities that are available. Denominated by respect and compassion for a fellow community member, these relationships provide the possibility of a dignified passage for the homeless person back into full membership in the community, including having a safe, secure home.

Core Model: The local Everyone Known to Someone committee

To provide support and structure to those who would be engaging with homeless persons and families, local committees would be recruited or created. These local committees will be town-specific, autonomous and self sustaining. They will be drawn from the local pool of compassionate persons who are willing to volunteer their time to cultivate and maintain these relationships. There are many ways to find these volunteers, and many of them are already organized and serving the homeless community. Being locally autonomous, local committees could engage in local publicity, make their own decisions about how to identify and how to approach homeless persons, and build on their existing systems of supports, such as meals and food shelves. Our task would be to create a clear structure and provide supports to achieve their goals and ours. They in turn would have a relationship with us, and help us to deliver services, get folks into the HMIS, and do the PIT count. The alliance Everyone Known to Someone Coordination group would strategize with the local committees to connect the homeless candidate with an HMIS licensed provider for data input and case management, and give them training in how to do the PIT count.

Development Phase, Time Line and Action Sequence

Timing in the initial stages of the outreach effort may be impacted by recent events in Burlington. The Burlington City Council has passed motions to address issues attached to homeless persons, setting up a study group to propose ways to address these issues, and members of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance have expressed a desire to address these motions. We will want to be alert to unexpected opportunities and unanticipated obstacles, which occur, and when the pace of events slows, we will need to revisit our intended time-line and action sequence.

Building on existing relationships

The strategy for building this network recognizes existing networks and relationships. To build a sustainable network we will need and want the buy-in of the existing political structures of each community, so that they can validate our work to the members of their communities. We will have demonstrated respect by going to them with our plan first, and build respect between the Alliance and the towns we are mandated to serve. So while members of the Alliance can provide informal notice to members of their own networks, including those in the towns in which they live, the Alliance, as a county-wide entity, would formally approach the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, and establish a relationship with it, first. Then through its relationships, the CCRPC will connect the Alliance with town Select-boards, police departments, rescue services, and libraries. The police and rescue teams are very likely to know the homeless members of their communities, so it will be helpful to the local committee to have working relationships with these public safety entities. The libraries are hot-spots for activity of the self-sufficient homeless, so their participation in the local committees will be essential.

With these relationships initiated, at least at the elected official level, we would begin out reach to those who are delivering, or would like to deliver, services to the homeless. Candidates include fraternal organizations and churches. There are many people of compassion who would welcome a structured relationship with homeless folks and the Alliance, especially with a promise that the homeless would get services, because it will provide an enhancement of their own mission-driven efforts.

There are many ways to reach volunteers. The Alliance members will have more ideas than comes to the mind of this writer. Certainly, we could ask local media to tell the story of our outreach, we could possibly get VPR to do a radio segment about our outreach, and we can post on FPF and Craigslist, just to name a few. Alliance participants themselves could be part of local committees, providing a live connection between the committees and the Alliance.

PIT Counts

PIT counts punctuate the implementation of this plan. The time before the next PIT count in 2018 is now less than four months, an amount of time that could be sufficient for: review, revision and passage of this plan; initial outreach to the CCRPC; development of a web presence for this effort; and possibly beginning to reach out to some of the Chittenden County towns. Since most of these actions are sequential, we will do what we can and review the Action Sequence at a future date. A corollary activity not dependent on this

sequence is upgrading the PIT count technology. More on this below.

The year between the 2018 PIT count and the 2019 stands up the remainder of the work proposed by this plan. The "Everyone Known to Someone" working group will be charged with managing relationships with the towns. With guidance as needed from the Steering Committee, the work group will make strategic decisions about when to reach out to a given town, and what resources to commit. Resources will be mostly in the form of members of the Alliance using their time to contact, engage, and develop relationships with towns, police and rescue departments, libraries, churches, fraternal organizations, and who ever else steps forward. This proposal envisions some participants of the Alliance assisting the local committee in the towns of their residence. The Alliance working group will be charged with negotiating these relationships, and developing the local committees, which will provide the sustainable and self-sufficient group for interacting with the Alliance.

Presuming a successful introduction from the Planning Commission to the towns, the work group will want to act quickly to solidify its contacts at the town level, and presuming that the work group cannot move forward with all towns simultaneously, maintain living relationships with the towns with which it will plan to engage later. Development of the local committees will most likely follow a "low-hanging fruit" pattern, in which small investments from us will result in some strong and active local groups. The committee must take advantage of such opportunities, and be mindful it does not ignore less ready towns. It might set goals which include development of committees at different places on the scale of difficulty. However, these are strategic decisions that belong to the working group.

If committee development proceeds very quickly in some towns, by 2018 a local committee might be ready to do a PIT count, but this would be a precocious development. By 2019, however, we would expect many of the local committees to be equipped to do the PIT count. In the meanwhile, Coordinated Entry will have been implemented, and many of the homeless persons these committees get to know will have been entered into HMIS.

Duties
Members of local committees represent, to their local homeless community, a portal to the services of the alliance. They are asked primarily to build relationships, making entry into the service systems a safe experience, and to keep themselves safe. Locally available services such as free clothes, meals, food are frequently the foundation of these relationships, but for the system based services (housing, safety from violence, mental health and health) local committees will be asked to defer to those systems. The local committees can also help to identify local housing resources, for coordinated entry.

Training
Training for the committees will include: social-emotional education from experienced outreach workers, on how best to develop relationships with persons who are un-housed or precariously housed; what information is needed for the HMIS, with the possibility of pre-collection; and how to execute the PIT count. It is hoped that through coordination with the HMIS data base, the PIT count can be simplified and made more accurate.

Discussions are underway with ICA employees on how this can be done.

Youth, Veterans, DV, Families

Members of the local committees can be trained to recognize members of these groups, how to offer aid, and how to provide initial screening. Referral to professionals in these fields can be as slow or quick as the client seems to need.

Coordinated Entry

According to the emerging Coordinated Entry process, a simple screening tool will be used to direct homeless clients to a "Hub", where they will receive assessment and prioritization. Local committee members will be trained to screen homeless persons for which assessment hub to use. Committee members can also be asked about resources available in their communities, to incorporate into the Coordinated entry system.

Ethics

Local committee members and homeless persons will need protection by a code of ethics. Examples include compulsory anonymity, prohibitions against inviting the homeless person into a private home, and prohibitions against providing loans or grants. This system of ethics can be developed from recommendations from the existing street outreach teams and in reflection on the differences between street outreach and local committee services, in an active conversation during the development phase of the local committees. Ethics will also evolve from experience.

The Maintenance Phase

Depending on the experience of the working group, the year following the 2019 PIT count could be the year that relationships with the local groups reach equilibrium. We must expect these relationships to be dynamic and in cycles of growth and decay. The "Everyone Known to Someone" (EKS) working group can be expected to have developed its operational tool kit, literature, website, visitation patterns, support tools, etc., and be settled into its routines of training and support of the local groups. Hence, the development phase of this plan would feather-off sometime in 2019. The plan then enters its maintenance phase.

Once local committees are established, each town and local committee in Chittenden County will be in relationship with the Alliance through its local committee. This proposal contemplates: an annual conference of the local committees to discuss best practices and to develop relationships; participation in Alliance meetings by some members of local committees; and local committee members being active in the "Everyone Known to Someone" working group. The EKS group will: maintain relationships with local and county authorities sufficient to achieve the goals of the Alliance; monitor the needs of local committees; provide training as needed; and facilitate collection of HMIS and PIT count data. This proposal envisions collaboration between autonomous entities who share related or congruent goals, and presumes that these relationships will be in flux and require ongoing attention from the EKS working group.

Branding

Local Committees will largely have their own identification. The Chittenden County Homeless Alliance will facilitate their work and its own by providing a badge or icon the local committee can add to its literature, store front, library, church or other publicity. Combined with Alliance marketing efforts, the local committee identified by the icon or badge will be understood by the community members, homeless and housed, as the place to go locally to get help.

Technology

The paper and input technology currently in use for the PIT count is slow, labor intensive and allows poor quality of data. I propose to adapt our technology to allow, in 2018, data to be input directly into a smartphone version of the existing questionnaire. I further propose that, with BoS, we investigate new technology to make the PIT count efficient, and accurate, and in full accord with HUD requirements, to be implemented in 2019 or 2020.

Housing Precarious

In its discussions, interest has been expressed by Alliance participants to understand the volume and nature of the precariously housed population. How and whether to do this is a larger conversation, but the local committees can be expected to provide important support to any effort we devise.

Local Committees In Burlington

While this proposal aims to organize across Chittenden County, in an effort to provide human scale relationships to members of the homeless community where they are more dispersed, it may be Burlington where this effort is most needed. Since it is Burlington where the most resources are concentrated, the "Everyone Known to Someone" strategy may need to be modified. I propose to learn from the experiences of the local committees, to understand best practices, and turn this strategy toward Burlington at some unknown future date, when lessons from this strategy seem ready and helpful.

Complaints and Their Resolution .

We fervently hope that complaints of abuse or misuse of resources will never be necessary. But an integrated plan must allow for this possibility. The Everyone Known to Someone committee of the CCHA will receive complaints, and if deemed substantive will ask the Chittenden Homeless Alliance leadership for counsel. Substantive complaints shall be further investigated first by a peer association of local committee members. This ad-hoc committee, with all due concern for the privacy and reputation of members of the community, and in service to the well-being of the network of local committees, will report their findings to the Alliance EKS committee, which in turn will report to the Alliance leadership for review. If no civil or criminal complaints are found, but concerns are valid, the Alliance leadership will review these findings for possible consultation with the local

committee of concern in the complaint. If concerns rise to civil or criminal in nature, the Alliance leadership will decide how to proceed. All such investigations shall be deemed confidential and privileged, being exposed to public review in the standard manner, when suits are filed. The Alliance reserves the right to sever its relationship with any local committee.

Impacts

We do not know how many homeless persons are populating the rural and suburban domains of Chittenden County, and this effort will help us to ascertain that number. However many there are, this effort will: fulfill our mandate to deliver services with equity across our assigned geography; assure us that, to the extent possible, someone has reached out to homeless persons and families where ever they are; provide a tool for assaying the precariously housed population; and create, in communities which may be hostile to homeless persons, an institutional device to extend compassion, impelling the local communities to become familiar with the human dimensions of homelessness and poverty, potentially altering cultural attitudes toward this population. ***While our goal is to "End Homelessness", this plan reaches further, to "End Community-less-ness". Each implies the other, each supports the other. We can strive for both.***

Stephen Marshall October 1, 2017