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## Hope to the homeless: City takes on tough issue

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Fewer people living on the streets of Indianapolis. More affordable housing for people at risk of homelessness. New local sources to complement federal funding for housing. More outreach and prevention programs.

The city can celebrate steady progress toward meeting goals set in 2002 in a groundbreaking document with an audacious title: the Blueprint to End Homelessness, a 10-year strategy for preventing and ending homelessness in Indianapolis. It aimed for long-term solutions instead of costly emergency responses. In 2002, it was heralded as the first of its kind in the U.S.; more than 300 other cities since then have established similar plans.

Next February, as the city hosts the 2012 Super Bowl, homeless advocates will mark the 10th anniversary of the writing of the blueprint and the final year of the initiative.

"We have some wonderful, wonderful programs that wouldn't be here except for the blueprint and the strategies put in place because of it," said Michael Hurst, program director for the Coalition for

Homeless Intervention and Prevention.

Homelessness hasn't disappeared in Indianapolis, of course. But it does appear to have dropped by half. The annual single-night homeless count -- 3,500 in 2002 -- has fallen over the years, to 1,488 in January 2010, and should stay steady or drop slightly this year. From that single-night total, it's estimated that 4,500 to 7,500 individuals experience homelessness at some point in the year.

A critical area of progress has been in aiding the chronically homeless, whose frequent use of public services costs the city anywhere from \$3.7 million to \$11.1 million annually, according to an Indiana University Center for Health Policy study.

Among those efforts:

The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department has created an outreach unit to match homeless and intoxicated persons with social services, instead of arresting them. Recruits also receive police academy

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instruction in dealing with the homeless.

An engagement center, where the homeless and those who are publicly intoxicated can receive treatment instead of going to jail or emergency rooms, is closer to reality. On Friday, a private donor gave money to renovate a building that will house the center, which officials say could save millions of dollars in public health and safety costs.

The blueprint set ambitious goals, not all of which have been met. Still, even in areas where much work remains, gains have been made. For example, although not all housing targets have been met, more than 1,800 units of affordable housing were added. If not for the recession, more housing may have been developed.

Yet, some trends should trouble Indianapolis residents. Children younger than 18 make up the largest percentage of the homeless. Although the 2010 one-night count showed a decrease in homeless families, the number of children without housing rose slightly, to 362. That doesn't include those who double up with relatives or friends. And the number of homeless families and children may have been higher if local agencies hadn't received an infusion of federal stimulus money for housing assistance.

School districts reported that nearly 3,000 school-age children in Marion County received homeless services last year. The lack of a steady place to call home harms children's physical and mental health, and their ability to concentrate on learning.

Two other hard-to-solve areas: people who were once in foster care, and individuals with felony convictions.

So the work won't end with the last chapter of the blueprint. Officials should now identify which strategies work best. Finding enough money for housing and programs will be an ongoing challenge.

Still, the Blueprint to End Homelessness models how the city can work together to confront a tough problem. It has appealed to the community's conscience by emphasizing that reducing homelessness isn't merely cost effective, but also humane and possible. It has shown a face of homelessness that is hard to turn away from.

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