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It takes a community to end homelessness

Written by

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As The Star so appropriately pointed out in its editorial March 13, community progress sometimes comes only when we as a community stay on task and stick together. Evidence could not be clearer than the imminent opening of the 50-bed Albert G. and Sara I. Reuben Engagement Center. This means chronically homeless, intoxicated people will get immediate attention and services at a public cost vastly lower than that spent to arrest and jail them.

We are well on our way to raising sufficient capital funds for the facility, which will cost \$1.8 million to \$2.4 million, with the very recent and generous gift of \$750,000 from the estate of Sara I. Reuben. This generous gift also causes us to pause and reflect on advances Indianapolis has made in the nine years since it adopted the Blueprint to End Homelessness, a 10-year strategy for preventing and ending homelessness in Indianapolis.

The Blueprint laid out goals to increase the number of units of safe and affordable housing and services attached to them that enable their residents to remain housed. It also sought to do more to prevent

homelessness, making services available so that people who had been homeless or nearly homeless could address the issues that had made them so.

It is heartening to contemplate the strides our community has made toward these goals. For example, the Marion County Low-Income Housing Trust Fund was established to make safe, affordable housing available to people with low and moderate incomes. Partners from the public and private sectors secured about \$1.3 million from permanent and reliable sources, including Health and Hospital Corp., which pledged \$1 million annually. Since the inception of the fund, nearly \$6.6 million has been invested in projects to build or rehabilitate 282 units of affordable housing.

That number includes 15 units of supportive housing reserved for military veterans established at Mapleton Park Apartments, a collaborative effort of Partners in Housing, HealthNet's Homeless Initiative Program and the Veterans

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Administration. Supportive housing is both affordable to residents and linked to intensive case management, pre-employment training, structured job searches, skills training, job placement opportunities and other services. Since the Blueprint, 969 similar supportive housing units have been created.

A computerized data collection process called the Homeless Management Information System captures information about the characteristics and service needs of people experiencing homelessness. The data are used to coordinate services for individuals, inform community planning, support advocacy efforts and enhance funding requests. In the last two years, the participation rate has increased from 22 to 37 agencies and from 40 to more than 130 programs.

And since 2005, Indy Homeless Connect, a one-day annual event, has provided homeless neighbors an array of services, including, for some, immediate housing, and for all, housing and employment assistance, information about public and Social Security benefits, identification, legal aid, mental health services, acute medical care and dental and vision screenings. At the fifth annual event in March 2010, more than 675 community volunteers and more than 100 provider organizations provided services to 1,069 homeless individuals, including 92 children younger than 5. The next Indy Homeless Connect is scheduled for April 13.

As the Blueprint's 10-year timeframe draws to an end, we know our community

still has considerable work to accomplish to ensure we really do end homelessness. To that end, the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention and our many community partners are using this impending anniversary to reflect on what about the Blueprint has gone well, what has not worked and what more needs to be done to ensure every neighbor has a safe place to call home.

Joyce is executive director of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention.

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