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How does Knoxville's plan to end homelessness compare to Indianapolis?

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KNOXVILLE (WATE) - Most people would agree homelessness is a problem in the Knoxville area, but what people don't seem to agree on is how to tackle it.

Five years ago, city and county officials started the [Ten-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness](#).

However, the plan seems slow to gain widespread public support, and there is a lot of debate about where to put homeless housing facilities.

Currently there are more than 300 cities with 10-year plans around the country, and not all take the same approach, of course.

Indianapolis was one of the first mid-size cities to launch a 10-year plan. Right now, it has an estimated 1,500 homeless people.

Eight years ago, the numbers were much worse in Indianapolis. More than 3,000 people were estimated homeless and officials knew more needed to be done. That is when the city launched its [Blueprint to End Homelessness](#).

The city was also the first major jurisdiction in the U.S. to finish and adopt a 10-year plan, according to Tim Joyce, executive director of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention of Greater Indianapolis.

In 2002, while Indianapolis was implementing its plan, the federal government was urging all cities to consider similar measures. In fact, a letter from federal officials praised Indianapolis' efforts and called the city "a model for cities across the country to follow."

In 2005, Knoxville followed suit and to date, both cities are touting similar successes.

Officials in both cities say:

- Their 10-year plans have led to better coordination of services.
- They have successfully implemented a better data tracking system called HMIS.
- Officials who spoke with 6 News say they are making significant strides to preventing homelessness, rather than just managing it through hot meals and shelters.

One of the biggest strategies or goals in both plans is the housing first approach.

Indianapolis and Knoxville focus on a scattered supportive housing approach, but the outcomes so far couldn't be more different.

Betsy Whaley, who helps run housing programs in Indianapolis, says many communities are using the "bridges out of poverty" approach to help the middle class understand what it takes for someone to get back on his or her feet.

Whaley also says community involvement is key to getting supportive housing units online.

"I think if you are trying to push something through, there will be opposition. I think it really requires that you get community buy in," Whaley said.

Whaley grew up in East Tennessee and graduated from the University of Tennessee. "East Tennessee is part of the Appalachian region so I know there is often a closed mind set, although that's not always true. But there a little more openness and diversity here (in Indianapolis)."

She and other officials spoke openly about getting churches and other groups to sponsor and lead the charge for supportive housing projects.

Now compare the numbers. In eight years, Indianapolis has added nearly 850 new supportive housing units. That's an average of more than 100 a year.

Knoxville has added 57 in five years. That's a little more than 10 units a year.

Another major distinction is that Knoxville chose to single out the chronically homeless in its plan. That's a move not everyone agrees with, and something the Indianapolis' plan does not do.

"Some have been homeless for six days, others for six years," Joyce said. "And while the six-day individual may be a little bit more stable, the fundamental thing they gave in common with the six-year person is they don't know where they are going tonight. So to treat them very radically different probably isn't the right approach."

Also in Indianapolis, there is a tremendous amount of support from the police department.

Two years ago, Sgt. Bob Hipple was assigned to work on the city's homeless problem. He is now a trusted point of contact with those living on the street.

Sgt. Hipple's often non-traditional police methods are making a difference. "We looked at what can we do as group to get them into treatment, rehab, housing, whatever we needed to do to get them out of that cycle," he explained.

In Knoxville, Burt Rosen with [Knox Area Rescue Ministries](#), and Ginny Weatherstone, with [Volunteer Ministry Center](#), are very interested in learning from other cities. They say our plan is a living document and should always be re-evaluated.

However, new Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett said, "I just think it's (the TYP) fraught with problems."

Mayor Burchett says he's considering pulling nearly \$50,000 in county funding from the plan if alcohol is allowed in supportive housing units.

"To me it would be a success if these folks were able to go out and live semi-normal lives and be productive members of society. To them, success is getting them off the street and into housing. There is not an incentive to get them off (drugs or alcohol). It's kind of like a methadone clinic. They want to get you off heroin, but not methadone because that's their money coming in," Burchett said.

Burchett went as far as to say serving the homelessness is a business, and he even questions whether everyone is really on board here for the right reasons.

"I think your so called homeless industry, I think you need to follow the dollars very

closely and the management groups involved. There is some big money in this. If they are not getting rich, they are getting some tax shelters," Burchett said.



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