

Mental Health and Shelter Collaborative Summary

Mental illness affects around six percent of the general population. However, among people experiencing homelessness, the National Institute of Mental Health reports up to 25 percent suffer from mental illness, with local homeless shelters indicating a much higher rate of 30 to 35 percent. This translates to 2,200 to 4,400 people annually who are homeless and with mental illness in Indianapolis.

Mental illness takes away a person's ability to fulfill normal life functions such as taking charge of daily responsibilities of maintaining a home, personal finances, or matters related to personal health. Holding down a job becomes almost impossible. Developing stable relationships with family, friends, employers, or even mental health workers proves to be incredibly difficult. These factors, and more, often begin a downward spiral into homelessness. People who are homeless and mentally ill often self-medicate with street drugs. In Indianapolis, up to half of the homeless individuals who suffer from mental illness are also addicted.

No one agency has the capacity, expertise or resources to adequately address the challenges faced by people with a mental illness. In 2006, representatives from mental health agencies, homeless shelters, hospital emergency rooms, and other homeless service providers began conversations about how all agencies could collaborate so that people who are both homeless and mentally ill could receive appropriate care. Over a series of meetings, it was agreed that working together as the *Marion County Homeless Shelter and Behavioral Health Providers Collaborative*, progress could be made. A few accomplishments include:

- the signing of a formal Memorandum of Understanding to show a commitment between the parties to develop and improve the infrastructure of agencies working with homeless individuals with mental illness
- the publication and distribution of a *Handbook of Help*, a resource guide for those facing homelessness
- training for front-line shelter staff in de-escalation techniques and motivational interviewing, and using screening tools for the intake process
- organized tours for mental health and front-line shelter staff to seven local shelters to gain understanding of each other's programs and facilities

In the future, the Collaborative plans to continue to support this population of homeless individuals with mental illness by evaluating service delivery options, placing trained clinicians at "point of entry" sites, and providing ongoing training to front-line staff.