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Area sees big drop in chronic homelessness

Cinde Ingram | Enterprise Staff Writer Nov 11, 2017 Updated Nov 11, 2017

GUILFORD COUNTY — Guilford County is one of only seven communities in the nation to nearly end chronic homelessness.

From 2013-2016, Phillips Foundation provided grants totaling \$1.96 million to Partners Ending Homelessness through United Way of Greater Greensboro. In 2013, there were 143 cases of chronic homelessness in Guilford County. By last summer, that count dropped to only three.

"We don't want to classify somebody as chronically homeless if they just show up at shelters once in a while," said Steve Key, director of Open Door Ministries in High Point. He said the downtown shelter houses about 70 to 75 homeless people a day, more than 500 people a year, but only a few of those are chronically homeless.

"In a nutshell, the chronic definition is the people who have been homeless for a long time," Key said. "We work with chronic homeless people through a couple of our programs. So if we get 70 people in our shelter a night, maybe a couple of them are chronic homeless."

Key said the new U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition is trying to distinguish between those who are chronically homeless versus those who are only homeless for a couple of days.

HUD previously defined chronic homelessness as an individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more or who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. Effective January 2016, HUD's current definition of chronic homelessness differs in the following ways: First, the four episodes of homelessness now have to add up to 12 months. Second, people who exited institutional care facilities after spending fewer than 90 days there previously would not have that period counted toward their homelessness. Now, it will be. Third, the time between periods of homelessness has been defined as seven days in order for the period of homelessness to constitute an episode.

"We had a lady that we housed this year who had been homeless for 15 years," Key said. "She had been homeless since early 2000s. That's chronic homelessness, not this guy who ends up getting drunk, going off and being here for a little bit. He leaves and comes back. He's got a chronic problem, but he's not a chronic homeless person that our community wants to rally around and make sure that we can help get into housing. Without our community's help, they're not going to be able to make their way out of homelessness because of their disability they have, the situation they live in or mental illness."

Key agreed the number of chronically homeless people has declined. "Maybe it was three on a particular day, but that number could be six tomorrow or 23 next week," Key said. "It's a moving target. I can have 75 people in my shelter tonight and I can move 10 of them out next week and then 10 more people are coming in. It's almost like we're peddling as fast as we can peddle."

Each case of chronic homelessness costs Guilford County taxpayers an estimated \$30,000 per year in emergency services and subsidized care. By implementing national best practices and evidence-based approaches, such as the Housing First model and creating an Assertive Community Treatment team, the Phillips Foundation's grant allowed PEH's efforts to save Guilford County taxpayers an average of \$1.26 million per year over the span of the

grant, or \$3.78 million in total.

Since PEH implemented the coordinated effort, chronically homeless individuals and households who enter the system in Guilford County are rapidly rehoused and provided with specialized services and resources for their individual needs to keep them in their homes sustainably and living as self-sufficiently as possible.

The first Housing First participants have shown improved health, housing stability and financial sustainability over a prolonged period of time. While numbers always fluctuate with people entering and exiting the system, the community can claim a sustainable zero as long as the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness is less than the 6-month average housing placement rate.

"Partners Ending Homelessness is extremely grateful for the investment and vision of the Phillips Foundation," said Brian Hahne, executive director of Partners Ending Homelessness. "Their seed funding of this community effort strengthened a system that is working hard every day to solve homelessness."

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