



Report Card Narrative

Opening Doors RI

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About *Opening Doors RI*

Opening Doors Rhode Island is the State's Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. Adopted in April 2012 by Governor Lincoln Chafee, the Governor's Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH), and the Housing Resources Commission (HRC), the *Opening Doors RI: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* ("the Plan") outlines a plan that significantly transforms the provision of services to Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness. Consistent with *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, the Plan seeks to sharply decrease the numbers of people experiencing homelessness and the length of time people spend homeless.

The Plan proposes to:

- End chronic homelessness by 2018
- Prevent and end homelessness among veterans by 2018
- Prevent and end homelessness for families, children, and youth by 2023
- Dramatically reduce - at least cut in half - all forms of homelessness in the state by 2023

Opening Doors RI shares the vision with *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, which states that: **No one should experience homelessness – no one should be without a stable, safe place to call home.**

Opening Doors RI also shares the values of the Federal Plan:

- Homelessness is unacceptable. It is solvable and preventable.
- There are no "homeless people," but rather people who have lost their homes who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
- Homelessness is expensive. Invest in solutions.

Goals of *Opening Doors RI*

- 1) Increase the supply of and access to permanent housing that is affordable to very low income households
- 2) Retool the homeless crisis response system
- 3) Increase economic security
- 4) Improve health and housing stability
- 5) Increase leadership, collaboration and civic engagement

Why this Report Card?

Opening Doors Rhode Island is an ambitious, but realistic, plan to address the very serious issue of homelessness in our state. The Plan, however, is only as good as its implementation. The purpose of the Report Card is to gauge, on an annual basis, how far we have moved toward meeting the goals outlined in the Plan and to adjust our focus where needed.

This Report Card aims to assess how well we are making the all important transition from “sheltering” those Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness to “housing” them.

Overall Grade for 2013: C+

Report Card Conclusions

- There have been positive changes in the way we respond to homelessness in our state, particularly in the areas that involve process, coordination and strategies to better serve Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness.
- We must continue to shift the focus from short-term crisis responses, like shelters, to the long-term solution of affordable housing.
- Systems reform alone cannot end homelessness. Fully funding the Plan will help the State improve its economy, realize long-term cost savings, and improve the lives of thousands of Rhode Islanders who are currently experiencing homelessness.

Report Card Recommendations

Recommendations: For the Governor’s Office

- Include funding for \$3.4 million in the State Budget for rental assistance
- Increase funding by \$439,000 in the State Budget for homeless prevention and assistance
- Take advantage of federal funding opportunities, such as Medicaid expansion and grant-funded programs for services

Recommendations: For the State Departments

- Commit staff and resources to the Plan and allocate funding for the Plan in departmental budgets
- Work with the Governor’s Office and the Department of Administration’s Budget Office to coordinate funding for the Plan across State Departments
- Take advantage of federal funding opportunities, such as Medicaid expansion and grant-funded programs for services

Recommendations: For the General Assembly

- Include funding for \$3.4 million in the State Budget for rental assistance
- Increase funding by \$439,000 in the State Budget for homeless prevention and assistance
- Support legislative initiatives that will facilitate implementation of the Plan

Recommendations: For the Homeless Service Provider Community

- Coordinate and collaborate to realize the goals of the Plan
- Shift the focus from sheltering those who experience homelessness to housing them – organizational strategic plans to be in step with the Plan
- Plan for the transition from sheltering those who are homeless to housing those who are homeless

Reasons for the Grades:

Note: The grades were developed through a systematic process of examining each goal in the Plan and marking progress on the strategies for each goal – noting whether progress had been made, a setback had occurred or the strategy had simply stalled. The overall grade for each goal was then determined.

Goal 1: Increase the supply of and access to permanent housing that is affordable to very low-income households.

Grade: C-

Overall Status: Improving

Permanent housing includes: permanent supportive housing for long term and chronically homeless persons with disabilities, service-enriched housing for homeless families with less intensive support needs, and deeply affordable housing for those with extremely limited incomes. The Plan calls for creating additional units of permanent housing by developing new units targeted to homeless and at-risk households and by providing rental and other subsidies to make existing housing affordable to extremely low-income families.

Successes:

- The General Assembly included \$750,000 for rental vouchers in FY 2014 budget
- The Housing Bond was placed on the ballot and passed, allocating \$25 million for the production of affordable housing
- The Governor's Interagency Council on Homelessness met regularly and focused on the issue of homelessness
- State departments and homeless service providers increased focus on seeking federal funding opportunities
- Public Housing Authorities (PHA) and homeless service providers have been collaborating more effectively

Barriers to Progress:

- Although the Housing Bond was funded, providing funds to produce affordable housing, no state funds were allocated to support operating subsidies to complement the Housing Bond (in previous years we have funded the Neighborhood Opportunities Program for as much as \$7.5 million for this purpose)
- The Governor did not include funding for rental vouchers in his proposed FY 2014 budget
- General Assembly only included 25% of the \$3 million in funding for rental vouchers called for in the Plan
- The state stands to lose federal vouchers for 526 families due to sequestration

- Formalized collaboration between Housing Resources Commission and Public Housing Authority has stalled due to the loss of vouchers through sequestration, resulting in an inability to place individuals and families experiencing homelessness in public housing units
- The State's goal to provide 100 additional permanent supportive housing units each year has stagnated due to funding freezes and cutbacks
- The State did not establish a systematic process for applying for federal grants and funding or coordinating efforts across State departments for joint applications
- Rhode Island has not established a threshold requirement or set aside for supportive housing in the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP)

Goal 2: Retool Homeless Crisis Response System

Grade: B+

Overall Status: Improving

The need is imperative for the homeless response system in Rhode Island to be as effective as possible. Flat funding on the federal level is likely to be the best-case scenario for the near future. Other sources of federal funds that could assist homeless people or low-income households are facing significant cuts.

Successes:

- More collaboration and coordination has occurred among the State Departments, funders, homeless service providers, constituents and advocates than ever before – *Opening Doors RI* is the vehicle for this unprecedented collaboration
- A State-funded and supported coordinated training program for front line homeless services staff was implemented
- Efforts are underway to pursue opportunities to fund housing stabilization services through Medicaid
- Strong leadership by Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH) Director, Craig Stenning, who chairs the Implementation Committee for *Opening Doors RI*
- Outreach to those Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness about expanded Medicaid eligibility under Affordable Care Act

Barriers to Progress:

- Plan for centralized intake and assessment process is proceeding, yet needs to be linked to universal wait list process and required in service provider contracts
- Inadequate capacity to meet the need for shelter diversion, rapid re-housing, housing stabilization and permanent supportive housing
- Missed opportunity to utilize existing street outreach workers for initial contact with the chronically homeless population regarding their potential Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act

Goal 3: Increase Economic Security

Grade: B-

Overall Status: Stalled

Preventing and ending homelessness requires that people who are homeless or at-risk have access to sufficient financial resources – through earned income or public benefits – to be able

to maintain decent, safe and sanitary housing. To the maximum extent possible, this should be achieved through employment, but people with long-term disabilities or other circumstances, which make full-time employment not possible, should be supported in accessing benefits.

Successes:

- Increase in the minimum wage in Rhode Island from \$7.75 to \$8.00 passed by the General Assembly and goes into effect January 1, 2014
- The General Assembly approved a pilot program that will temporarily expand eligibility for child care subsidies to include unemployed, low-income families who need child care so they can participate in job readiness and training programs
- BHDDH has created an Employment First Policy that is promoting work as a healthy component of an individual's life and they are creating an Employment First Task Force and Advisory Groups to implement a statewide initiative
- Work Supports Strategies grant from the Ford Foundation is working to provide greater access to key work supports programs, including Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Child Care Assistance and RI Works
- The Restaurant Meals Program, the SNAP pilot that allows the homeless population to access meals in community settings (such as Subway) with their SNAP benefits, was launched
- Progress through SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) to increase rates of enrollment in SSI/SSDI for homeless individuals with disabilities
- Use of administrative databases for cost-benefit analysis
- Medicaid expansion to allow low-income adults with incomes below 138% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to access insurance under the Affordable Care Act
- Rhode Island has received two Department of Labor and Training grants for veterans

Barriers to Progress:

- Rhode Island continues to have one of the highest unemployment rates in the country
- Department of Labor and Training needs to deepen its focus on meeting the goals of *Opening Doors RI*
- Workforce Investment Boards, Department of Labor and Training and homeless service providers need to increase coordination and communication to meet the workforce development and job placement needs of individuals experiencing homelessness
- Funding for job coaching is needed to assist in the transition to employment

Goal 4: Improve Health and Housing Stability

Grade: C+

Overall Status: Improving

In order to maintain housing stability, residents of supportive housing must be able to access essential services. Developing strategies for funding those services is essential to developing and operating supportive housing. Additionally, access to primary care and behavioral health care must be expanded in order to allow residents to access services in a cost-effective manner, e.g., without resorting to emergency rooms or other unnecessary high cost care.

Successes:

- Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals is a model state department in terms of supporting the homeless population

- Community mental health providers received two federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants focusing on the homeless population
- Case conferencing has begun between Harrington Hall staff and Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals staff
- Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals and the Mental Health Association of RI are pursuing opportunities for funding housing stabilization services through Medicaid
- Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act will allow increased access to healthcare for Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness
- The Executive Office of Health and Human Services and the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals are working on funding and service models that will include supportive housing providers

Barriers to Progress:

- The homeless service system needs to better partner with FQHC (Federally Qualified Health Centers) in the solution of permanent supportive housing. FQHCs are an important vehicle to implementing *Opening Doors* and need to be brought to the table.
- There are no clear structures in place to operationalize the use of Medicaid funding for housing stabilization
- Homeless health care clinics have not been able to accommodate the number of patients seeking services

Goal 5: Increase Leadership, Collaboration and Civic Engagement

Grade: C

Overall Status: Improving

The Federal Strategic Plan is driven by a vision that no one should experience homelessness – no one should be without a safe, stable place to call home. Accomplishing that vision is complicated by diminished public sector resources, a continuing economic downturn, and the highly complex needs of people experiencing homelessness. Leadership is essential in order to secure the needed resources to have a meaningful impact in preventing and ending homelessness in Rhode Island.

Successes:

- *Opening Doors RI* working committees are active and meeting regularly
- Excellent data exists to highlight the scope of need, as Rhode Island is one of the leaders in the nation in HMIS (Homeless Management Information System)
- Housing and Community Development will be elevated to its own division in new Department of Commerce in 2015

Barriers to Progress:

- Need to change attitudes to focus on investing in affordable housing rather than investing in more shelters
- Homeless service providers must work on getting all shelter residents on waiting lists for affordable housing as part of the intake process
- All homeless service providers must prioritize accurate data collection in HMIS (Homeless Management Information System)

- Attendance and representation by some high level departmental decision-makers (department directors / high level deputies) on the Governor's Interagency Council on Homelessness meetings has fallen off
- Need to expand the table to include key stakeholders in government, non-profits, philanthropy and the private sector
- Housing and Community Development must continue to be elevated in state government to ensure a focus on homelessness and low income housing consistent with its importance to the economy