

Heading Home: Minnesota's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness
Webinar Question & Answer Session – February 11, 2014

Q: Can you speak a bit about how those at risk of homelessness will be identified and assisted to avoid homelessness?

Commissioner Tingerthal: One of the things that I think is significant about this plan is that it's just as much about prevention of homelessness as it is about ending homelessness. I think one of the major ways is that each agency charged with is starting to identify who they're serving and who of those people are maybe meeting some early indicators that they may be on the edge of being homeless Or have recently been homeless and what can they do differently to make sure that they're serving them well. It's a little unclear at this point what those indicators or characteristics of people that each agency will be looking for, but we believe that this is something that they're going to try to identify and through part of increasing access to data and linking data together, this will be useful for that.

Cathy stated that she thinks that the most significant opportunities for preventing more homelessness through the state plan is this look at mainstream resources and how we use existing mainstream resources more effectively for people. For example, in looking at our childcare system, how do we make sure that childcare is getting into the hands of people who need it more quickly, so that they can hold onto a job that they recently secured for example. Looking at those systems and looking to improve them, not just after the fact of homelessness, but prior to as well. The coordinated assessment process can also be used as a tool for prevention. When people come into a system throughout the state, wherever they are, that they can talk to somebody, describe their current situation and even if they are not currently homeless, we can use that as an opportunity to connect them to the resources that will prevent their homelessness.

Q: How do we develop a more concise, unified case statement about homelessness that can be shared with the general public to create more "will" behind reducing homelessness? Stereotypes still get in the way of understanding how the "Perfect storm" of issues beyond a person's control contributed greatly to homelessness. Too many taxpayers still believe we're simply giving out handouts with minimal decrease in homelessness instead of realizing the contributing factors are what constitutes increased homelessness.

Commissioner Tingerthal: This is a great question and very much at the top of our minds when Cathy ten Broeke and I met recently with a group of funders who are forming this funding collaborative.

Cathy ten Broeke: One of the things that has been enormously helpful this year with the Interagency Council and frankly, beyond, is changing the conversation from focusing on "homelessness" and changing the conversation to "what does it mean to ensure housing stability for all Minnesotans?" I think this is when you really start to capture people's imaginations and also helps them realize who we're really talking about. Housing stability for children in school to ensure that they can be successful. Housing stability so that we can build a stronger workforce. All of these things that really help us get out of that stereotypical mindset of who's experiencing homelessness and start to think about the importance of housing in a different way.

To answer the question about how we will develop a coordinated message on this, I think one of the strategies that we will be looking to with our funders group, as well as many other partners throughout the community who work on the homelessness issues, from the Coalition of Homelessness to Minnesota Housing Partnerships and many others, is to talk together and really work out together the messages that we think are most critically important for all people and Minnesotans to understand. Because it is

absolutely true that 'community will' really is the driver of political will. This topic will be a very important part of our work early in this process.

Commissioner Tingerthal: I would like to add two other comments. First, I think with the budget that was passed by the State Legislature last year there are two initiatives that are really helping us make very public the linkage between stable housing and other outcomes that the state is looking for. On the same day we announce the new plan, we also announced the selection of three programs. The Promise Neighborhood of St. Paul, the Northside Achievement Zone of Minneapolis, and a similar program in Clay County/Moorhead, where we are taking 2 million dollars of state appropriated dollars and making it available to families that are working with existing school success programs and providing up to two years with of rental assistance so that those families don't have to move. Our goal is to increase attendance levels. There's a lot of evidence that it will lead to increased performance. I'd like to tell people that last year, when I was presenting these proposals to the Legislature, I think it was the first time in history that an education commissioner actually came and testified at the housing committee at the capital. We have a similar joint collaboration at the Department of Corrections, to assist those that are exiting correctional institutions and moving into communities, to provide rental assistance to those individuals as well. In both cases, we're really working through existing providers of rental assistance that work in our Housing Trust Fund program, so we're not adding new players to the field here; we're simply connecting the dots between existing initiatives and some of these additional dollars. The other thing I'd like to say to the group, in an unabashed effort to get you to understand the discussion that will take place when the Legislature convenes on February 25 this year, is that Governor Dayton did include a very strong statement about the importance of truly affordable housing in his bonding package this year. Cathy mentioned that the Governor has recommended 50 million dollars that can be used for supportive housing. So those projects that cannot afford to pay debt service, which is what allows us to keep the rents very affordable for truly low-income families; and the preservation of existing affordable housing, such as public housing, or Project Based Section 8. This is a project that we successfully introduced 2 years ago called Housing Infrastructure Bonds. We allocated those dollars within months of the passage of that 35 million dollars and we have a long waiting list for that as well. So for those of you who understand on a front line basis how difficult it is to obtain housing for low-income families at risk of homelessness, I urge you to talk to your legislatures about the importance of supporting the inclusion of the Housing infrastructure bonds in the bonding bill this year.

Q: I understand that Public Safety departments were key players in establishing this plan. Were there discussions about domestic/sexual violence survivor's access and barriers to housing? As a housing advocate for survivors, I am curious about this.

Cathy ten Broeke: Yes, absolutely. When you read the more detailed version of the plan, you'll see a couple of key areas in particular where we talk about having to increase the coordination between the Department of Public Safety's work with domestic violence, and our development of supportive housing, our targeting of supportive housing, and our affordable housing. That was very much part of the conversation and one of the key members of the senior leadership team was an expert in that area and continued to bring that topic to us.

Commissioner Tingerthal: Among the commissioners there were some very interesting conversations about the dilemma of domestic violence, really between the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Corrections about what lessons we've learned from the past, and how difficult it is to remove members from a family knowing full well that it may send them into economic despair and into homelessness. While at the same time, needing to remove the violent offenders. It is on the minds of

the commissioners to find some new ways that we can address these issues.

Q: If a statewide coordinated assessment is a goal, should regions still be working on their own CA system? How will coordinated assessment be coordinated at the state level?

Commissioner Tingerthal: It's becoming increasingly clear, and we just had a really strong Coordinated Assessment Session with one of our HUD TA Providers Matt White last week. Obviously, we need to create the tools that work in our communities, so what we did last week is we looked at some of the tools that are successful in other places, and take the elements of those tools that work best for us and create our own tools. Cathy ten Broeke believes that this is going to result in communities creating tools that work best for them in their communities. But we would like to do it in a way where we can share some common elements across all these tools and across the state so that we can use all the tools to tell a statewide story, and to fully understand what's going on statewide so that we can compare apples-to-apples when necessary. But, at the same time, not be restrictive so that local communities can't have the flexibility they need to create the tools that would really work for what's best for them and their communities.

Q: Safe, affordable housing is very hard to find. Our partners working with newly arriving refugees are having a difficult time finding housing - so our refugees to MN are often on the edge of homelessness - particularly after the first 3 months when their resettlement agency support ends. What is being done with local developers to build/renovate truly affordable low income housing? Some projects that are billed as "affordable" really are not.

Commissioner Tingerthal: At Minnesota Housing, just because we ended the Business Plan to End Long-Term Homelessness, does not mean that we have walked away from our criterion that gives priority to developing truly affordable housing for families that are at risk of being homeless. We are going through an interesting shift now, since the previous plan was really focused on people that experienced long-term homelessness and frankly was a bit more focused on singles, rather than families. We are needing to do some re-thinking within Minnesota Housing about shifting and adding a priority of families that are at risk of being homeless, and when we would give or awarding points to projects that are focused on families. One other thing is that it takes a little time for housing developers to learn the new priorities. It often takes a couple of years for a project that is directed at a particular population to get into the queue for a developer to find the appropriate piece of land, develop an appropriate project and assemble the funding for that project, so we have a priority this year of clarifying what will be the definition of housing that we're looking for under this plan, and really addressing the question of families that are at risk of homelessness.

Q: Isn't this going to be terribly expensive? Maybe you can talk a bit about how you've worked with the commissioners and senior staff to think not just about dollars, but think about how we can use existing resources to target better and perhaps give an example of that.

Cathy ten Broeke: There's a couple of answers that we can give when people ask this question, and one that others are probably thinking, but we all know how expensive it is when we do not do these kinds of efforts, and to not prevent and end homelessness when we can. The second part of this answer is, that we do know there are ways for us to be more effective and to really try to target the work we're doing with the existing resources we have. One example is that we discovered during this process, that the Department of Human Services has multiple programs they run, that have something to do with Housing Assistance. We need to make sure that all of those programs that have housing assistance are also

coordinated with existing programs that provide housing assistance at Minnesota Housing. Often times, for lack of coordination, we get someone who is experiencing homelessness into a housing opportunity because we think that it's all we have available and it may not be the right fit for that individual or family and worst case scenario is that the solution isn't sustainable and the individual or family becomes homeless again. Or, the kind of services are much more intensive or expensive than that individual or family needs which may in fact be preventing us from using that kind of expensive, intensive intervention for a family or individual with many higher barriers. This is really about making sure that all of the resources we use are being thoughtfully and effectively targeted.