

This New Jersey County Was The 1st In The U.S. To End Chronic Homelessness

WBUR.org, by Jeremy Hobson and Serena McMahon, February 20, 2019

Bergen County, New Jersey, was certified by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2017 as the first community in the country to end chronic homelessness.

Chronically homeless people, as defined by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, are "people who have experienced homelessness for at least a year, or repeatedly, while struggling with a disabling condition such as a serious mental illness, substance use disorder, or physical disability."

And in 2016, the county — New Jersey's most populous, located just across the Hudson River from New York City — was recognized for becoming the first in the state to eliminate homelessness among veterans.

About 10 years ago, Bergen County had only four temporary shelters for an estimated several hundred homeless people, says Julia Orlando, director of the Bergen County Housing, Health and Human Services Center. She tells *Here & Now's* Jeremy Hobson that after forming a focus group with input from 200 local residents, the county was able to pinpoint "the shortfalls and barriers to our existing system."

So Bergen County devised a difficult goal: completely end chronic homelessness. Orlando says the first step to addressing the problem was building the Housing, Health and Human Services Center.

"By having one facility in this suburban area to provide meals, to provide housing, to provide services in one location, we were able to better address the needs of a chronically homeless person, rather than having to have them transverse through the entire county of Bergen," she says. "We provided a location that was a one-stop center, where that individual could get all of the services that they needed. And that really served to be, I think, a turning point in our work."

The county also focused on improving and maintaining close relationships with local landlords who were willing to provide housing — a problem many cities face in their efforts to secure permanent housing options, Orlando says.

"I think the key to Bergen County is our collaboration. It's working with all of our partners together where everyone has the same goal," she says.

A countywide trust fund was also established to help cover the costs.

"Having a homeless county trust fund to fill in the gaps when you need services — and really there's nothing else to pay for a certain thing that you need — has been tremendously helpful," she says.

Right now, the county is focusing on the needs of baby boomers who may become homeless, and young adults between 18 and 24 years old. It's created a young-adult task force and youth council, made up of homeless young people, in order to address the demographic's specific needs.

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When dealing with young homeless people, the service center has to work fast.

"So many of our young adults are exploited and can be in situations that are really precarious," Orlando says. "We want to make sure that we're doing really good assessments with them and offering them really safe places to stay."

Ending chronic homelessness has given the Bergen County Housing, Health and Human Services Center time to focus its energy and resources on eviction and short-term homelessness prevention.

"Now that we've ended chronic homelessness, people who are experiencing homelessness for the first time, it can be rare, it can be brief and it can be nonrecurring, because we can focus our efforts on those individuals," Orlando says.

The most important thing for cities looking to reduce their homeless population, according to Orlando, is to have a goal that the community is on board for.

"If your goal is to end chronic homelessness, then the thing that you need to do is you need to make sure you're prioritizing those folks. You're going to need everyone on the same page," she says.

Orlando admits it's not an easy undertaking. But ultimately, the entire community benefits.

"When I look at a place like Hackensack, New Jersey, once we really eliminated chronic homelessness, people no longer saw people sleeping on a bench or in a park," she says. "The quality of life for people has really improved."

Julia Corcoran produced this interview and edited it for broadcast with Todd Mundt. Serena McMahon adapted it for the web.