

**COUNTY OF SUFFOLK**



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SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE**

**&**

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**SUFFOLK COUNTY JOINT  
TASK FORCE ON  
HOMELESSNESS:  
ACTION PLAN**

**December 2002**

**SUFFOLK COUNTY JOINT TASK FORCE ON HOMELESSNESS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On December 12, 2001 The Suffolk County Joint Task Force on Homelessness convened for the first time. The task force was comprised of members of the public and non-profit sectors and was charged with developing strategies to increase the availability of short and long term housing for displaced families. Through monthly meetings and a public hearing held in May of 2002, the task force was able to develop an action plan that includes strategies that promote self-sufficiency, increase the supply of affordable housing, and provide support to families that require more intensive services.

Suffolk County's strong housing market has negatively affected low-income families. The dwindling supply of affordable housing coupled with an increased demand has driven up prices and housing units have become increasingly scarce and unaffordable. During November 2002 the Suffolk County Department of Social Services reported that nearly 2,300 people were in emergency housing, approximately 1,400 of those were children. Presently the lack of shelter space has forced the county to place over 176 families in motels.

Of the over 550 families in emergency housing 50% are first time shelter residents. Once stabilized their only impediment to self-sufficiency is the lack of affordable housing. Another 30% are individuals and families that have experienced homelessness once or twice before. Developing their capacity to earn higher wages through vocational training and enhancing educational credentials is an important element in attaining their long-term economic independence. The remaining 20% are chronically homeless and incapable of achieving self-sufficiency without substantial supportive services.

The obvious solution is the development of affordable housing stock available to low-income families. The short-term alternative is to develop an emergency housing system that provides a humane and supportive environment. This action plan offers the following recommendations as immediate responses to the county's homelessness crisis.

- Develop a plan to stimulate the creation of workforce housing options including starter homes, cluster, multi-family dwellings, and all other permanent housing. The county needs to have permanent housing options which are tailored to the resources and needs of all workforce segments of our population. The task force recommends that every effort be made to increase the supply of decent housing for homeless and workforce individuals and families. Prevent the homelessness of Suffolk County's special populations by strengthening prevention programs.
- While permanent housing is the best solution for addressing the needs of the homeless, the short-term recommendation is to move people out of motels. Emergency shelters (especially Tier I and Tier II facilities) provide essential services and a sense of stability to their residents. The county must pursue every avenue in order to facilitate the development of additional large shelters. This will include examining the availability of properties (i.e. the grounds of former hospitals), the renovation of commercial properties, and any other existing vacant structures.
- Preventing homelessness (closing the "front door") is the most efficient way of addressing Suffolk's homeless problem among families affected by mental illness or substance abuse issues. Federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as

non-profit organizations must work together to prevent the special needs population from becoming homeless. In an attempt to curtail the proliferation of homelessness the task force recommends strengthening preventive services.

- If prevention is “closing the front door” on homelessness, providing the homeless with the proper array of services once they enter the social welfare system is “opening the back door”. Linking homeless individuals to appropriate services remains the most efficient path to self-sufficiency. Case management, time management, and mentoring services should be readily available to the homeless population so that ongoing support and guidance can be provided during this challenging time. Streamlining this process requires coordination between non-profits, shelter providers, and government. The task force recommends increasing the accessibility to housing services through a coordinated continuum of care.
- Establish a formal structure and resource manual of available services to improve the communication between the county and its shelter providers. In order to properly service their clients, shelter providers need to be aware of all the possible services available. The task force recommends that the Suffolk County Departments of Social Services and Labor and their shelter providers coordinate information sharing. Creating a comprehensive resource manual that will contain an updated listing of all available programs and services including telephone numbers, program descriptions and criteria, available transportation, and child care services, is also recommended.
- Many of the homeless have limited access to transportation. This hampers their pursuit of educational and vocational training, access to services, and their ability to gain and retain employment. The task force recommends that Suffolk County establish a policy to issue countywide bus passes to employed or employable homeless families. This pass will be restricted to transportation to meet DOL requirements, education and vocational training, job interviews, and housing searches. Clients will be responsible for maintaining and submitting monthly travel logs in order to remain eligible for services.

The task force calls for a partnership between government, non-profits, and the private sector to answer these challenges and coordinate resources that eliminate barriers to self-sufficiency. Solutions such as creating additional emergency shelters that provide necessary services, streamlining the process of moving the severely mentally ill into permanent housing, providing transportation, and encouraging educational and vocational training will help homeless families and those at risk of homelessness achieve economic independence.

By implementing the initiatives contained in this action plan, we can create sufficient housing for Suffolk’s families and assist those with special needs in gaining a lasting and stable home environment.

## INTRODUCTION

***Sometimes the situation is only a problem because it is looked at in a certain way. Looked at in another way, the right course of action may be so obvious that the problem no longer exists. - Edward de Bono***

Over the last several years the number of families and individuals without a permanent home has risen dramatically. Many families and individuals are living in emergency shelters and motels. The obvious answer is to expand permanent housing options for those at the lower end of the economic scale and those in need of supportive services. Recognizing that it is essential to address the needs of Suffolk's homeless families, County Executive Robert Gaffney and Presiding Officer Paul Tonna created the Joint Task Force on Homelessness. Consisting of members from the public and non-profit sectors, the task force was charged with developing strategies to increase the availability of short and long term housing for displaced families.

Members of the task force were organized into four subcommittees: Housing Resources, Mental Illness & Substance Abuse, Education, and Transportation. Through its research efforts, the task force was able to identify the specific factors contributing to homelessness. The subcommittees met regularly to address these factors and develop steps to overcome them. After reporting their findings and strategies to the task force for feedback, the subcommittees further refined these strategies.

Through monthly meetings and a public hearing held in May of 2002, the task force was able to develop an action plan in order to begin addressing the issues that contribute to homelessness. This action plan presents these recommendations and provides time lines for their implementation. Included are strategies that promote self-sufficiency, increase the supply of housing affordable to lower income households, and provide support to families that require intensive services. The task force challenges every level of government, the non-profit community, and the private sector to mobilize the resources necessary to help Suffolk County address its current crisis and eliminate homelessness entirely.

## OVERVIEW OF THE HOMELESS PROBLEM

During November 2002 the Suffolk County Department of Social Services reported that over 2,300 people were in emergency housing, approximately 1,400 of those were children. Without a comprehensive action plan this number will continue to rise. The department has taken aggressive steps to manage this increase, but the growing influx of homeless families outpaces its ability to create shelter beds and place clients in affordable permanent housing.

Ironically, Suffolk County’s strong housing market has negatively affected low-income families. Landlords have taken advantage of this market and liquidated their holdings to buyers who are willing to pay top dollar. As rental housing was converted to owner-occupied housing, the working poor were squeezed out of their residences. The dwindling supply of affordable housing coupled with increased demand drove up prices and rental units became increasingly scarce and unaffordable. The table below compares the supply of available housing in Suffolk County in 1990 and 2000.

### **Suffolk County Vacancy Rate**

**1990 Vs 2000**  
**(Source: US Census)**

Type	1990	2000
Owner-occupied	1.9%	0.9%
Renter-occupied	7.0%	3.4%

Supporting this observation is the fact that 50% of the families living in Suffolk County shelters are first-time shelter residents. Whether they lost their housing due to an unexpected illness, a temporary period of unemployment, or mental illness, they found it extremely difficult to find a suitable and affordable replacement. Many of these families’ members are employed and continue to work while they are in a shelter. Once stabilized their only impediment to self-sufficiency is the lack of available housing.

Another 30% of the homeless population in Suffolk County shelters are individuals and families that have experienced homelessness once or twice before. While the lack of affordable housing is a key factor to their current homelessness, developing their capacity to earn higher wages is an important element in maintaining long-term self-sufficiency and economic independence. Vocational training and enhancing educational credentials by obtaining a GED or completing two years of college, are first steps to helping them earn enough money to afford renting a home in Suffolk County.

The remaining 20% of the homeless population living in shelters are those who are chronically homeless and incapable of achieving self-sufficiency without substantial supportive services. Included in this sub-group are those who continue to rely on social welfare services because of developmental and physical disabilities, mental illness, and substance abuse issues. Long-term housing managed by experienced service providers may be necessary for this population.

Solutions to the county's homelessness problem must address all three segments of the homeless population. By adopting a comprehensive approach that helps prevent homelessness while supporting efforts to be self-sufficient, this problem will be reduced to manageable levels.

The simple solution is to increase the affordable housing stock available to low-income families. The short-term alternative is to develop a shelter system that provides a humane and supportive environment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Suffolk County has developed and implemented a variety of programs to assist the homeless population in earning a living wage and achieving self-sufficiency. While current Suffolk County Department of Social Services policies and procedures are progressive, improving client programs and services remains a primary goal of the department. It is to this end that the Suffolk County Joint Task Force on Homelessness submits this action plan. Each recommendation includes a proposal, an explanation, a time frame, the responsible parties, and the necessary action steps for implementation.

### **I. Housing Resource Recommendations**

The lack of permanent affordable housing is a major contributing factor to our county's homelessness crisis. As long as the demand for affordable housing exceeds the supply, low-income families will be at risk of becoming homeless. The Suffolk County Department of Social Services has aggressively responded to the growing influx of homeless by developing resources to accommodate its clients. Over the past three years the department has added shelter space to house an additional 130 families (384 total families). However, this has not come close to meeting the county's needs. Presently the lack of shelter space has forced the county to place over 176 families in motels. In the past year seven new non-profit agencies have passed the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process and will add to the county's shelter supply in the near future. However more needs to be done to create rental housing.

The department has worked to prevent homelessness through its Homelessness Prevention/Resource Development Unit. This unit mediates landlord and tenant disputes with the goal of preventing housed families from cycling into homelessness. During the past year they have helped avoid over 380 cases of emergency housing placements.

The Finder's Fee Project permitted a \$2,000 fee to be paid to not-for-profit agencies that assist families in their transition from emergency to permanent

housing. In addition to the continuation of this innovative program, the task force offers the following recommendations:

### **Payment of Rental Arrears to Prevent Homelessness**

**Proposal:** Review and evaluate the present rental arrears payment policy to determine whether modifications and extensions of such payments can prevent additional homelessness.

**Explanation:** The department has started a comprehensive review of its internal procedures for providing rental arrears and other homeless prevention incentives. This internal review process includes an assessment of needs, benefits, and costs, in addition to a review of how New York State and its counties authorize assistance for arrears. The department should confirm that its policy provides the maximum assistance allowed to those being evicted as well as those at risk of homelessness. If necessary, the department will also consider requesting state modifications to regulations in order to provide increased assistance to those in imminent danger of eviction.

**Time Frame:** 1– 3 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County Department of Social Services.

**Action Steps:**

1. The department reviews current policies and procedures.
2. Modify, reform, and implement homeless prevention policies as needed.

### **Local Law 23 of 2000 – Restriction on Placement of Shelters**

**Proposal:** Amend Local Law 23 to allow siting of shelters in proportion to the needs of the homeless from each community. In the interim, grant a moratorium on enforcing the shelter siting restrictions.

**Explanation:** The task force recommends that Section 3, Site Procedure of Local Law 23, requiring “no more than four congregate emergency facilities within a two square mile area” be amended. This section is arbitrary in terms of establishing boundaries and does not account for the shelter needs within a community or school district, particularly those impacted by homelessness. Similarly, a two square mile boundary could eliminate desirable locations in adjacent communities that have no congregate shelters. It is more appropriate to base the number of shelter beds or units permitted on the number of homeless identified within a township.

**Time Frame:** 1 – 3 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government

**Action Steps:**

1. Draft an amendment to Local Law 23 of 2000 to authorize a two-year moratorium on siting restrictions.
2. The Department of Social Services develops a methodology to determine the number of homeless in each township and works with each town to develop an adequate supply of congregate shelters.

**Establish a Siting Committee for Tier I and Tier II Family Shelters.**

**Proposal:** Establish a siting committee as the critical first step towards building Tier I and Tier II shelters.

**Explanation:** Tier II Family Shelters are congregate shelters with private rooms housing more than ten families. Tier I shelters are less private congregate facilities suitable for single adults and short-term family placements. These shelters provide important support services to their residents including meals, counseling, and housing-search assistance.

The siting of shelters is a controversial issue. Therefore, a consensus among all levels of government needs to be built. This process should begin with a review of significant homeless factors including: the number of homeless, the school district of origin for homeless children, the availability of sites, and the support services needed. The task force recommends that Suffolk County establish a siting committee that will review this information and identify an appropriate number and distribution of sites throughout the county. This committee should be established by resolution, detailing the members and the time frame for action.

**Time Frame:** 1– 3 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government

**Action Step:**

1. Draft a resolution establishing a siting committee for Tier I and Tier II Family Shelters.

**Town Participation in Addressing the Needs of the Homeless**

**Proposal:** Develop partnerships between the county and the towns in order to ensure appropriate housing resources are available in all communities.

**Explanation:** In addition to creating new large shelter facilities (Tier I and Tier II) the county needs to ensure the availability of smaller congregate and scattered-site shelters. The location of these shelters should reflect the need for emergency housing in each township. Pursuant to the state regulation “to the extent possible, referrals must be made to facilities whose location will minimize the dislocation of the family from the family’s community and schools,” the task

force recommends that the county and townships work together to locate adequate shelter resources local to where the homeless originate.

Towns should be informed of the number of homeless families originating from within their borders as compared to the number of families that can be accommodated by existing shelters. Towns in need of additional shelters should be consulted regarding their preference for shelter type and location. This exchange of information would assist the towns in understanding the number and needs of their homeless families. With the creation of sufficient homeless shelters in each town, families will be placed in emergency housing closer to their community and their children will avoid excessive commutes to school. Housing people from other townships will no longer impact local communities.

**Time Frame:** 0 – 6 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government and town supervisors

**Action Steps:**

1. County officials meet with town supervisors to explain the extent of the homeless problem and the need for their assistance.
2. Schedule meetings between legislators, town representatives, and Department of Social Services for the purpose of establishing shelter types and locations.
3. Continue to coordinate between towns and the department for shelter development.

**Using County Owned Properties as a Housing Resource for Homeless Families**

**Proposal:** Prioritize the use county property acquired through the tax-delinquency process as a housing resource.

**Explanation:** Each year the county takes title to properties and houses through the tax-delinquency process. This inventory, which may include non-traditional residences such as downtown commercial properties and abandoned strip-malls, should be used to address the housing needs of the homeless. The task force recommends that a formal plan be developed to address the financial and legal issues necessary to meet this objective. This research will include consideration of the following issues:

- Lease or transfer of unoccupied houses to non-profit shelter providers.
- Consideration of an appropriate term of the lease or transfer
- Status of the property and the steps needed to bring it in compliance with the New York State Housing Code.
- Payment of property taxes or the development of a payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT).

- Preference given to those coming out of shelters who are SHARP and Section 8 eligible.
- The provision of client/tenant support services.
- Consideration of the final disposition of the property to the town, county, non-profit, or individual.

This proposal has the potential to assist the homeless and provide income to the county.

**Time Frame:** 3 - 6 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government

**Action Steps:**

1. Formation of an inter-departmental task force to develop a formal plan to achieve this goal.
2. Implementation of this plan to utilize county resources for homeless families.

**Develop Additional Tier I and Tier II Shelters in Western Suffolk County.**

**Proposal:** Assist non-profit agencies in developing Tier I and Tier II shelters in western Suffolk.

**Explanation:** While permanent housing is the best solution for addressing the needs of the homeless, the short-term recommendation is to move people out of motels. Emergency shelters (especially Tier I and Tier II facilities) provide essential services and a sense of permanency to their residents. The county must pursue every avenue in order to facilitate the development of additional large shelters. This will include the availability of land (i.e. the grounds of former hospitals), the renovation of commercial properties, and any other appropriate vacant structures.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 2 years

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government, Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH)

**Actions Steps:**

1. The department formulates the criteria for size and type of potential shelters.
2. Suffolk County government works with the siting committee to identify possible sites.

**HELP Suffolk's Lease Extension Package.**

**Proposal:** Support HELP Suffolk in their efforts to extend their current lease agreement beyond its expiration date of 2005.

**Explanation:** Serving 76 families, HELP Suffolk operates the only Tier II Family Shelter in Suffolk County. The task force believes that this shelter will be needed well beyond 2005 when the 15-year Family Shelter Term Agreement is due to expire. The task force supports the continuation and potential expansion of the facility and recommends that the Department of Social Services work with HELP USA to explore and advocate for the extension of the lease.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 2 years

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government, Town of Brookhaven, HELP Suffolk, HELP USA

**Action Steps:**

1. HELP Suffolk develops a proposal to extend their lease beyond 2005. This extension should include the consideration of financial incentives to the Town of Brookhaven.
2. Suffolk County requests a meeting with the Town of Brookhaven, HELP – Suffolk, Inc., and the Department of Social Services to negotiate an extension.

**Specialized Shelter**

**Proposal:** Develop specialized shelters to meet the needs of specific populations of the homeless.

**Explanation:** The county provides specialized shelters for domestic violence, pregnant teens, and veterans. This model has been quite effective in providing services tailored to the unique needs of the population it serves. There are other populations that may benefit from specialized shelters, such as those with substance abuse problems and mental illness. The task force recommends that the Department of Social Services consider specialized shelters to better serve different segments of the homeless population.

**Time Frame:** 2 years

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government

**Action Steps:**

1. The department identifies specialized shelter needs.
2. Department of Social Services reaches out to the Shelter Providers' Association to request their assistance in specialized shelter development.
3. The department re-evaluates the rates for specialized shelters and develops an RFQ.

## Section 8 Vouchers

**Proposal:** Prioritize and expand all Section 8 Housing Voucher programs that provide housing subsidies to the homeless

**Explanation:** The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a variety of housing voucher programs that provide federal subsidies to workforce individuals and families who may be at risk for homelessness. Section 8 voucher programs fund an array of initiatives including homeless programs, home ownership, rental, family unification, and housing for people with disabilities. The current Section 8 Housing Program is experiencing problems due to a shortage of homes and lengthy waiting lists. Public housing agencies should review and alter their administrative plans to target homeless families on their waiting lists. Further, the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal should allocate additional Section 8 vouchers to public housing agencies specifically for the homeless. Towns could set aside a portion of their unused vouchers for project-based Section 8 programs to create permanent rental housing. The task force also recommends that the towns develop an outreach program to heighten landlord awareness of the various types of Section 8 voucher programs. This could facilitate landlord participation and an increase in the available housing stock.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 1 year

**Responsible Parties:** Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), HUD, town governments, Suffolk County government, Community Development Corporation (CDC)

### Action Steps:

1. Call for a conference of federal, state, county, and town governments to discuss funding, land, and zoning changes aimed at creating workforce rental housing.
2. Provide technical assistance to those towns that are developing program models, preparing applications, and applying for funding.
3. Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless requests the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal to provide public housing agencies with Section 8 Vouchers to target the homeless families on their waiting lists.
4. Encourage towns to apply for Section 8 Programs that assist the homeless, and to allocate their unused vouchers for developing permanent rental housing.

### **Support Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing**

**Proposal:** Support the development of new rental housing through the Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing (LICARH).

**Explanation:** One of the major obstacles to meeting the housing needs of Suffolk County residents is the limited housing supply. Additionally, the affordable housing initiatives have focused on home ownership. It has become apparent that the only way to fully address the homeless problem is to have a full mix of housing options. First and foremost, we need to expand the number of rental units that exist in Suffolk County.

The task force recommends that Suffolk County government partner with and support the L.I. Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing. The campaign's mission is to increase the availability of rental units throughout the region by stimulating the creation of new rental units and redeveloping existing structures in sustainable, environmentally sound, and mixed-income neighborhoods.

The county should devote resources to help support the goals of the campaign. The task force recommends that every effort be made to increase the supply of decent, low-cost housing for homeless and workforce individuals and families throughout Suffolk County. The creation of a comprehensive and effective affordable rental housing development strategy will include incentive zoning, raising public awareness, and providing technical assistance to developers.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 1 to 3 years

**Responsible Parties:** Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing (LICARH), Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), local community development agencies, Suffolk County government, Keys Committee, Technical Assistance Progress Tracking (TAPT), Continuum of Care Group and all member agencies.

**Action Steps:**

1. Suffolk County government continues to support the Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing.
2. Suffolk County grants \$35,000 in funding to the campaign.

### **Increase Supply of Decent Workforce Housing Throughout Suffolk County**

**Proposal:** Develop a plan to stimulate the creation of workforce housing options including starter homes, cluster, multi-family dwellings, and all other permanent housing.

**Explanation:** In addition to rental housing the county needs to have permanent housing options which are tailored to the resources and needs of all workforce

segments of our population. The task force recommends that every effort be made to increase the supply of decent housing for homeless and workforce individuals and families.

**Time Frame:** 10 years

**Responsible Parties:** Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing (LICARH), Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), local community development agencies, Suffolk County government, Keys Committee, Technical Assistance Progress Tracking (TAPT), Continuum of Care Group and all member agencies.

**Action Steps:**

1. Develop model legislation with an emphasis on inclusionary zoning that can be adopted by local municipalities.
2. Create public relations and education campaign regarding affordable housing to dispel myths and garner community support.
3. Become proactive in future county and town construction plans, action plans, and DSS / Housing Master Plan to maximize funding allocated to homeless programs.
4. Support and strengthen the capacity of existing and potential non-profit housing providers through training, resource development, and technical assistance, including the Keys for the Homeless Conference.
5. Lead the Continuum of Care Group's issues and problem-solving meetings.
6. Submit at least 10 applications to the following sources for capital funding to increase the stock of affordable housing: HUD 811/202, HUD Housing Assistance Program (HHAP), Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), Housing Opportunities for People With Aids (HOPWA), Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR), NYS Office of Alcohol & Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program, and the Affordable Housing Program.

## **II. Mental Illness / Substance Abuse Recommendations**

There are many individuals and families in shelters that are impacted by serious mental illness and/or substance abuse problems. Accounting for over 20%, this population is chronically homeless and may always be in need of supportive services. Many are not receiving services due to undiagnosed disabilities, behavioral problems, and lack of knowledge of existing services or how to access them. Insufficient coordination between shelters and mental health / substance abuse treatment providers and client refusal, further compound this problem. Suffolk County has worked in conjunction with a number of non-profit agencies in an attempt to address these issues. A Single-Point-of-Access (SPA) to all

residential facilities for persons with psychiatric disabilities has been initiated. This will expedite referrals to permanent housing and services.

The task force wishes to support the proactive efforts of the county by providing the following recommendations:

### **Preventing Homelessness for Special Populations (Closing the Front Door)**

**Proposal:** Prevent the homelessness of Suffolk County’s special populations by strengthening prevention programs.

**Explanation:** Preventing homelessness (closing the “front door”) is the most efficient way of addressing Suffolk’s homeless problem among families affected by mental illness or substance abuse issues.<sup>1</sup> Federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as non-profit organizations must work together to prevent the special needs population from becoming homeless. In an attempt to curtail the proliferation of homelessness the task force recommends strengthening preventive services.

**Time Frame:** 9 to 12 months

**Responsible Parties:** HUD, Suffolk County Office of Community Development, Department of Social Services, Department of Health, United Way, Keyspan, Parish outreach centers, the INN, Continuum of Care agencies and Suffolk members, Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), Technical Assistance Progress Tracking (TAPT)

#### **Action Steps:**

1. Strengthen homelessness prevention programs by initiating and/or expanding emergency shelter programs, emergency rent, security, and mortgage grants, emergency grants for utility assistance, legal aid, funding for interventions, counseling, case management, and other emergency services.
2. Provide technical assistance to at least three agencies to develop program models, prepare applications, and apply for funding for prevention services from HIP, HPNAP, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), and other funding sources.
3. Begin training on a county and regional, automated Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to more accurately and efficiently document the needs and gaps in housing services.

### **Providing Specialized Services (Opening the Back Door)**

#### **Proposal:**

- Increase accessibility to housing and services by achieving a seamless continuum of services.

- Expand outreach and supportive services to shelters to engage the chronically homeless.
- Strengthen supportive services to enable individuals and families to move from emergency to permanent housing.

**Explanation:** If prevention is “closing the front door” on homelessness, providing the homeless with the proper array of services once they enter the social welfare system is “opening the back door”. Linking homeless individuals to appropriate services remains the most efficient path to self-sufficiency. Case management, time management, and mentoring services should be readily available to the homeless population so that ongoing support and guidance can be provided during this challenging time. Streamlining this process requires coordination between non-profits, shelter providers, and government. The task force recommends increasing the accessibility to housing services through a coordinated continuum of care.

It is important to identify what parts of the mental health, substance abuse, or criminal justice systems these clients originate from in order to provide the appropriate supportive service. A combination of approaches utilizing the newly formed initiatives (e.g. Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT), Single Point of Access, etc.) and replication of successful outreach models is recommended. Many individuals and families in the shelter system lack educational / vocational training or suffer from the effects of a serious mental illness and/or substance abuse problem. The task force recommends improving access and expanding supportive services to assist these individuals and families in their transition from emergency to permanent housing.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 2 years

**Responsible Parties:** Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), Continuum of Care Group and Suffolk members, local government agencies and community development agencies, Technical Assistance Progress Tracking (TAPT), Department of Social Services, Federation of Employment and Guidance Services (FEGS), Federation of Organizations, Department of Health, Family Service League (FSL), Pederson Krag, Clubhouse of Suffolk, Community Development Corporation Long Island (CDCLI), other service providers and agencies

**Action Steps:**

1. Strengthen and expand the continuum of care network by recruiting at least ten new members through outreach, incentives, and technical assistance.
2. Increase the level of participation in community planning, the continuum of care process, the continuum of care group, and its sub-committees and networks.

3. Expand successful outreach programs in Suffolk County such as the Life Entitlement Advocacy Project (LEAP).
4. Provide training to shelter providers on assessing mental illness and substance abuse, and locating available housing and services.
5. Develop a self-sufficiency services plan to target the mentally ill.
6. Implement at least three new Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams and three new community-based case management teams to serve persons with chronic mental illness.
7. Provide technical assistance to secure and retain funding to support required services. These programs include employment readiness, job placement and follow-up, legal services, case management, counseling, clinical services, crisis intervention, training in life skills, and parenting.
8. Update and expand the Directory of Emergency Services for the Homeless, and upgrade the system to an interactive, web-based database.
9. Develop ways to help the homeless increase their vocational training or enhance their education credentials (e.g. earning a GED or completing two years of college) in order to afford housing in Suffolk County.
10. Encourage and provide technical assistance to at least ten continuum of care agencies to develop program models, prepare applications, and apply for funding under HUD's Mainstream 8 Program.
11. Provide technical assistance to at least five agencies to develop program models, prepare applications, and apply for funding for supportive services from OMH, OASAS, ESGP, DHCR, HOPWA, and other sources.
12. Develop, implement and operate programs funded through sources described above.

### **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)**

**Proposal:** Use a region-wide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to prevent those individuals most at risk, including persons with mental illness and substance abuse histories, from cycling into homelessness.

**Explanation:** The Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH) is currently piloting a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) developed with HUD grant funds. The HMIS will incorporate the whole continuum of care. The task force recommends that a coordinated approach be implemented using a region-wide HMIS. This approach will involve the Suffolk County Department of Health, the Department of Social Services, the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), the New York State Office of Alcohol & Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), local jails, and hospitals. This consortium will utilize the HMIS data for planned prevention and work to ensure that people are not discharged into homelessness.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 2 years

**Responsible Parties:** Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), Department of Social Services, Department of Health, continuum of care members and provider agencies, representatives from local jails and hospitals, New York State Office of Mental Health

**Action Steps:**

1. Implement region-wide HMIS system and use data to plan for prevention.
2. Coordinate efforts with local jails, hospitals, NYS OMH, and OASAS.

**Permanent Supportive Housing Stock**

**Proposal:** Increase the supply of permanent supportive housing opportunities by 250 per year over the next 5 years.

**Explanation:** One of the contributing factors of cyclical homelessness is the lack of supportive housing. There is a variety of funding streams and resources that can be used to develop this type of housing. The task force recommends utilizing these resources to support non-profit agencies in their application for federal and state funding. The task force further recommends the exploration of federal block grant funds (e.g. Community Development Block Grant [CDBG] and HOME) for the development of permanent supportive housing.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 1 year

**Responsible Parties:** Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless (NSCH), Association for Community Living (ACL), Suffolk County government

**Action Steps:**

1. Send funding notices, and provide training and technical assistance on developing permanent housing using the following funding sources: HUD Continuum of Care; HUD 811; NYS HUD Housing Assistance Program (HHAP); Federal Home Loan Bank of New York – Affordable Housing Program (FHLBNY-AHP); NYS Office of Mental Health (OMH); Community Development Block Grant (CDBG); HOME; LIHTC; NYS Office of Alcohol & Substance Abuse Services; Division of Housing & Community Renewal-HOME; Division of Housing & Community Renewal-HTF.
2. Advocate for the use of county-owned land to serve as sites for the development of permanent housing utilizing the funding sources listed above.

**III. Education Recommendations**

The rise in technology and the current standards of the service job market have increased educational requirements for those entering the workforce. Vocational training and enhancing educational credentials by obtaining a GED or completing two years of college, are effective ways to help people earn a living wage and

remain off public assistance. The majority of Suffolk County's homeless population has the ability to be self-sufficient with the proper support and training. Under the Education for Gainful Employment (EDGE) funding program the county has doubled the time frame for the homeless to develop the skills necessary for gainful employment. This extension demonstrates the commitment toward helping the homeless secure a job that will keep them off public assistance.

Affordable and accessible childcare is an important component in assisting the homeless to complete these educational / vocational programs and attain or maintain employment. Suffolk County partially funds the Child Care Council to provide resource and referral services enabling families to choose a child care provider that best meets their needs. Suffolk County has also doubled the average number of children enrolled in Non-Public Assistance (NPA) low-income childcare. The estimated cost for NPA childcare in fiscal year 2002 is 28.5 million dollars, with a requested 2003 program expansion to 31.5 million dollars.

The commitment to education extends to school-aged children. In January 2002, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was reauthorized, under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). "The new provisions of the act ensure educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness."<sup>2</sup> The county supports the reasoning behind the legislation, including the enforcement of mandated school-based educational liaison services prescribed therein. Additionally, the county has been working with the school districts, BOCES, and New York State to ensure that the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act are carried out.

Recognizing Suffolk's commitment to education and training, the task force recommends the following supplements to their current efforts:

<b>Enhance the Assessment of Self-Sufficiency Potential Evaluation Tool</b>
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**Proposal:** Review and update the assessment tool currently used to determine intellectual ability, mental illness, and the special needs of homeless clients.

**Explanation:** In order to maximize the effectiveness of the education/training and employment programs it is necessary to identify the obstacles to self-sufficiency. The first step of this process is the completion an assessment of self-sufficiency administered by the Department of Social Services. Those individuals who are mentally ill need to be identified and given proper treatment and care. The task force recommends that the assessment tool be reviewed to ensure that it is an effective indicator of mental illness. Based upon this review it should be updated accordingly.

**Time Frame:** 0 – 6 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Services, Department of Labor, Suffolk County Division of Mental Hygiene and Substance Abuse

**Action Steps:**

1. Evaluate the current assessment tool.
2. Amend as necessary.

**Coordination of Resources**

**Proposal:** Establish a formal structure and resource manual of available services to improve the communication between the county and its shelter providers.

**Explanation:** In order to properly service their clients, shelter providers need to know all the possible services available. The task force recommends that the Suffolk County Departments of Social Services and Labor and their shelter providers coordinate information sharing. Creating a comprehensive resource manual that will contain an updated listing of all available programs and services including telephone numbers, program descriptions and criteria, available transportation, and child care services, is also recommended.

**Time Frame:** 6 – 9 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Services, Department of Labor, the executive director of each emergency housing shelter provider

**Action Steps:**

1. Schedule a convenient place and time, and begin attending monthly meetings.
2. Develop the manual.

**Streamlining of Case Management Services**

**Proposal:** Create a committee to explore alternative ways of providing client documentation.

**Explanation:** State regulations and local procedures often require a client to submit documentation to the county for the continuation of benefits and other case related issues. Since travel and coordination of child care is a problem for many homeless families, these routine submissions further complicate a client's ability to find housing and meet their employment and training requirements. The task force recommends that the department work with shelter providers to develop a system to better utilize shelter resources. Case managers can assist clients by faxing the necessary documents to the county and coordinating phone communication, to ensure the receipt and acceptance of such documentation in lieu of face-to-face contact.

**Time Frame:** 1 to 3 months

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Service, Department of Labor, shelter providers

**Action Steps:**

1. Establish a committee to review the current documentation submission process.
2. Adopt and implement the provisions.

**New York State InVEST/JOB Funding**

**Proposal:** Encourage local non-profit agencies to apply for NYS InVEST/JOB funding.

**Explanation:** The InVEST/JOB Start program allows eligible training organizations to prepare unemployed and underemployed participants for jobs in occupations that are in demand. The task force recommends that local qualified non-profit agencies apply for InVEST/JOB funding, and that the list of qualified agencies be extended.

**Time Frame:** Approximately 1 year

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Services, Department of Labor, local service providers

**Action Steps:**

1. Provide outreach, technical assistance, and support to qualified service agencies in the application process for NYS InVEST/JOBS funding.
2. Expand the list of qualified agencies.

**Educating Homeless Children**

**Proposal:** Assist the county in all aspects of communication with school districts in order to facilitate compliance with the provisions set forth by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

**Explanation:** The task force recommends that the county work closely with school-based educational liaisons to ensure the continuity of the education of homeless children. A liaison database is currently being developed by Eastern Suffolk BOCES. The Department of Social Services should work closely with the educational liaisons to expedite the child's return to school.

**Time Frame:** 0-6 months

**Responsible Parties:** New York State Education Department (NYSED), Department of Social Services, BOCES, the executive director of each emergency housing shelter provider, school districts

**Action Steps:**

1. The Department of Social Services utilizes the database established by Eastern Suffolk BOCES to facilitate school placements.
2. The department coordinates existing services and resources to expedite and stabilize educational services for homeless children.

**Coordination of Employment Resources**

**Proposal:** Establish better coordination between job developers, potential employers (including industry and business associations) and shelter providers.

**Explanation:** In order for Long Island's economy to remain robust, industry needs a pool of qualified workers. Many shelter residents have proven work histories but may benefit from additional vocational training or education targeted to positions in demand. The task force recommends that the Suffolk County Department of Labor continue to work closely with Long Island's many business associations and industry trade groups to determine what vocational and educational training would help shelter residents obtain employment that provides greater earning opportunities to help them become self sufficient. The task force also recommends that the Department of Labor share this information with shelter providers and help develop a plan to aid qualified shelter residents apply for these positions.

**Time Frame:** 6 – 9 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Services, Department of Labor, the executive director of each emergency housing shelter provider, and local business associations and industry trade groups.

**Action Steps:**

1. Schedule meetings with multiple industry trade groups to determine the skills necessary for positions that need to be filled.
2. Inform shelter residents of this information.
3. Develop a plan to help shelter residents obtain the necessary skills to obtain these positions.

## IV. Transportation Recommendations

Many of the homeless have limited access to transportation. This hampers their pursuit of educational and vocational training, access to services, and their ability to gain and retain employment. Additionally, homeless parents often have difficulty transporting their children to the available child care services.

Over the past few years the Department of Social Services has developed and implemented programs designed to address these needs. Project JUMPSTART provides automobiles to low-income employed individuals to assist them in retaining and improving their employment. Additionally, the department has secured Community Solutions for Transportation (CST) grant funds (\$640,000), which it has allocated to the Department of Labor. The CST program provides transportation for the employed and employable.

These county efforts have done much to ease the burdens that the limited access to transportation creates. The task force supports their continuation and offers the following supplemental recommendations:

### Bus Passes

**Proposal:** Adopt a bus pass policy for all employed or employable emergency housing families.

**Explanation:** Suffolk County Transit is implementing a swipe card system for the public bus system. This change requires the Departments of Social Services and Labor to reform their process for distributing bus tokens to clients. The task force recommends that Suffolk County establish a policy to issue countywide bus passes to employed or employable homeless families. This pass will be restricted to transportation to meet DOL requirements, education and vocational training, job interviews, and housing searches. Clients will be responsible for maintaining and submitting monthly travel logs in order to remain eligible for services.

Additionally, each shelter needs to have a van to transport people to educational / vocational training, for food shopping, and to laundry facilities. Vans should also be run by the vocational and educational providers to transport public assistance clients who are enrolled in these programs and lack transportation.

**Time Frame:** Up to 1 year

**Responsible Parties:** Suffolk County government, shelter providers, vocational and educational providers

**Action Steps:**

1. Establish a bus pass policy for homeless families.
2. Distribute bus passes to all employment eligible individuals and their families.
3. Establish vans where necessary for education and employment

**Community Solutions for Transportation (CST) Funds**

**Proposal:** Utilize new Community Solutions for Transportation (CST) funds to provide transportation for employed or employable emergency housing clients.

**Explanation:** The task force recommends that new Community Solutions for Transportation (CST) funding be targeted specifically to help homeless people maintain or obtain employment. This programmatic enhancement would enable homeless families to work towards self-sufficiency. The department will work to maximize the use of these dollars to service the highest number of employed homeless possible. In meeting this objective, consideration should be given to using contracted transportation services and the leasing of vans by the county for shelter facilities.

**Time Frame:** 3 – 6 Months

**Responsible Parties:** Department of Social Services, Department of Labor

**Action Steps:**

1. Coordinate targeting efforts.
2. Submit proposal for funding.

## CONCLUSION

An obvious solution to the homelessness problem in Suffolk County is the development of housing that is affordable to workforce families. Unfortunately, a significant portion of the homeless population is faced with either a mental illness or substance abuse problem. This action plan addresses each element of this broad and complex issue: housing, education, mental health/substance abuse and transportation.

By implementing the initiatives contained in this action plan, we can create sufficient housing for Suffolk's families and assist those with special needs in gaining a lasting and stable home environment.

The task force calls for a partnership between government, non-profits, and the private sector to answer these challenges and coordinate resources that eliminate barriers to self-sufficiency. Solutions such as streamlining the process of moving the severely mentally ill into permanent housing, providing transportation, and encouraging educational and vocational training will help homeless families and those at risk of homelessness achieve economic independence.

The Suffolk County Joint Task Force on Homelessness submits this action plan with the goal of putting an end to homelessness in Suffolk County. Mere words will not accomplish this goal. Energy and effort coupled with commitment and compassion will.

As the old English proverb says, ***"The shortest answer is doing."***

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2002. A Plan Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years. Washington DC: NAEH.

<sup>2</sup> Evans-Tranumn, Shelia. (October 2002). Letter to District Superintendents of Schools, Superintendents of Public Schools, School District Homeless Liaisons regarding *The Education of Homeless Children and Youth*. Brooklyn, NY: NYS Education Department.