

PRESS RELEASE

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Experts Say Better Reentry Planning Can Reduce Homelessness

(CHICAGO, July 14, 2008) Mental health, corrections, and homelessness experts from several agencies and nonprofits joined officials from Cook County and the federal and state governments here today to push action to help those discharged from hospitals, jails and prisons avoid homelessness.

The "Countywide Forum on Discharge Planning and Homelessness" focused on current discharge procedures and ways to improve them and ease reentry into community life, with a special emphasis on new solutions and collaborations that will prevent homelessness, recidivism or re-institutionalization.

"Today we are bringing together representatives from federal, state, county and local government with nonprofits, advocates and consumers of homeless services to talk about how we can work together to prevent homelessness for people who have been discharged from institutions," said Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (IL-9) in her keynote remarks to participants. "It is this type of collaboration that is absolutely necessary to create new initiatives and more effective policies so that people move out of systems and into safe, decent, affordable housing"

Advocates have long maintained that stable housing is one of the most important ingredients in successful reentry programs.

"In these times of diminishing resources and increasing needs, it's essential that collaboration occur at all levels to ensure people stay housed with the necessary supports, and that transitions from institutions to the community are planned correctly," noted Katrina Van Valkenburgh, Director of Illinois and Indiana Program for the Corporation for Supportive Housing. "110,000 people will leave Cook County Jail or Illinois Prisons in the next year returning back to their original home communities in Cook County. Many will likely end up homeless if we do not work together to prepare for their release and create alternatives."

Those who attended today's forum pointed to the number of different populations throughout the community that are in need of more effective attention and assistance during reentry.

"Through Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness, we are making progress in ending homelessness for thousands of people," said Nancy Radner, Chief Executive Officer, Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness. "But we are finding that people who leave other systems - from mental health, from corrections, from child welfare - can end up in the homeless system. This forum highlights how effective planning and coordination among these systems is the key to preventing homelessness for so many people."

Representatives of nonprofits from areas outside of Chicago say the issue of reentry goes beyond the City's borders and must be addressed through a regional approach.

"When we looked at how to prevent homelessness for people leaving hospitals, jails, and other public institutions, it just made sense to work together at a countywide level," said Jennifer Hill, Executive Director of the Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County. "Some critical institutions

operate at the county level, like the county hospital and county jail. Even when we're talking about the people coming from state-level systems, like mental health and foster care, we knew that Cook County numbers make up a large proportion of the state's numbers."

The forum, which was hosted at Loyola University Chicago's Kasbeer Hall, placed a heavy emphasis on efforts to build cooperative links and relationships between agencies and every level of government.

Organizers took time from their brain-storming sessions to honor Congresswoman Schakowsky and Cook County Commissioner Earleen Collins, also a speaker at the forum, for "Their Leadership and Contributions to the Collaborative Effort to Prevent and End Homelessness."

Participants received added insights from an expert panel featuring Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart; Theodora Binion Taylor, Director, Illinois Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse; David R. Buchanan, M.D., M.S., Chief Medical Officer Erie Family Health Center; Dan Wasmer, Regional Director, Illinois Division of Mental Health; Eugene Herskovic, Homeless Coordinator, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; John Cheney Egan, Head of the Office of Housing and Cash Assistance, Illinois Department of Children & Family Services; and Roberta Fewes, Deputy Director, Office of Programs & Support Services, Illinois Department of Corrections.

A resource table with materials was available to assist providers working with undocumented persons facing reentry and other issues.

The forum was sponsored by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County, Evanston Alliance on Homelessness, Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC, Inc.), and Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning.

For more information, visit www.thechicagoalliance.org

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