



thechicagoalliance.org



Preparing people to lead extraordinary lives

EMBARGOED UNTIL

June 26, 2008

For More Information

Ambar Mentor
Valerie Denney Communications
312-408-2580 x25 – office
773-343-1481 – cell
ambar@vdc.com

Steve Christensen
Loyola University Chicago
312-915-6164 – office
312-545-8807 – cell
schris6@luc.edu

HOMELESSNESS A GROWING PROBLEM FOR CHICAGO-AREA SENIORS

First-Ever Report Finds Many Homeless For First Time in Middle Age; Homelessness Amongst Those 50 Years and Older is Up 26 Percent in Last Five Years

CHICAGO— The number of homeless people over 50 is increasing at an alarming rate and they have limited resources for support, according to a new report issued today by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness and Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL).

The groundbreaking report, which for the first time tracks homeless individuals aged 50-64, found that a majority of people in this age group became homeless for the first time in middle age.

The nine-month study was created in response to local homeless service agencies who were reporting an increasing number of older individuals seeking help. Between 2001 and 2006, Chicago-area agencies saw, on average, a 26 percent increase in older individuals needing services, the report finds. The study also offers a comprehensive portrait of the older homeless, the issues they face and trends in the homeless population.

"The surprising finding is that these are not individuals who have been living on the streets for 20 years. Rather they are usually people employed in low-wage jobs and one personal catastrophe, such as an injury or hospital bill, pushes them over the edge into homelessness," said Nancy Radner, CEO, Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness. "While a younger person might bounce back by tapping into the resources of family or government-run programs, an older person generally has fewer options and eventually ends up homeless."

"I fell into homelessness at the age of 61 while I battled addiction. I went from living in my own apartment to the streets," recalls John Stovall, now 69, who was homeless for several years before finding permanent housing recently. "I go back to my old neighborhood and find that many of my peers are in a similar situation. One thing can take over your life and next thing you know you have no home."

Homeless over 50: The Graying of Chicago's Homeless Population reports other significant findings:

- **Employable older individuals find challenges to work.** Nearly 40 percent of the older homeless in the study have the will, ability and work history to become employed but are hampered from obtaining employment. Major reasons include a mismatch of skills to the job market, a decrease of jobs paying a living wage and ageism in the employment market.

- **Veterans unable to access benefits.** While one-third of the individuals in the study were veterans, only 1 percent reported getting veteran's benefits.
- **Safety net social welfare programs fail this population.** Existing safety net programs target those younger than 48, and most programs for seniors cannot be accessed until ages 62 (housing) and 65 (Social Security).

The study built on a 2001 survey of more than 1,300 Chicago-area homeless people—one-fourth of which were over the age of 50. It combined interviews and focus groups with 53 homeless individuals and 60 service providers. Trends and demographic information came from administrative data spanning 2001 to 2006. The report also includes 10 in-depth life history interviews conducted in 2007.

“For the first time ever we have an inside look at this forgotten segment of our population,” said Christine C. George, PhD, Assistant Research Professor at CURL. “Important but often neglected issues such as proper nutrition, eye/vision care, or mental health greatly impacts the quality of life for these individuals. This report should be used as a foundation to make some significant policy changes to better meet the needs of this group.”

To address the challenges of an aging population faced with homelessness, the report makes several recommendations in key areas including:

- A stronger partnership between public and private agencies that serve people who are homeless and the aging.
- The enactment of state universal paid sick time, so ailments and temporary disabilities don't completely cut someone out of their job.
- Expanding job training programs for individuals over 48.
- Improving access to SSI benefits. Research shows most individuals who are initially denied SSI for not being “disabled enough” eventually receive it once they contest the ruling.

The study's findings are being presented at a downtown conference today, which features a keynote address from Mayor Richard M. Daley. The Chicago Alliance works closely with the City of Chicago to implement Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness. Representatives from the Illinois Department of Aging; Chicago Department of Senior Services; the National Council on Aging; Health and Disability Advocates and Matthew House will also offer various perspectives on the aging homeless crisis.

The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness plans to use the findings to help shape the implementation of the Chicago Plan to End Homelessness.

###

The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness saves lives and improves the quality of life for everyone by leading an effective and cost-efficient new way to end homelessness. Formed through a consolidation of the Chicago Continuum of Care and the Partnership to End Homelessness, the Alliance brings together key stakeholders involved in ending homelessness: philanthropic leaders, the research community, people who have experienced homelessness and over 70 homeless service agencies. The mission of the Chicago Alliance is to create, support and sustain effective strategies to end homelessness in Chicago.

Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) is a non-traditional university research center. CURL promotes an innovative model of teaching and learning that reaches beyond Loyola's campuses and classrooms to develop equal partnerships between the University and city or suburban communities. CURL is guided by a mission that places a strong emphasis on research that addresses community needs and involves the community at all levels of research. By working closely with community leaders outside the University, the center combines the knowledge and experience of both University researchers and individuals or organizations in non-academic settings. This produces stronger research outcomes that are highly effective in addressing current and emerging community needs.