

PROJECT OVERVIEW: St Louis County FHPAP

St. Louis County, Minnesota has a land area of over 6,200 square miles, and a population of 200,255 (2011 US Census Bureau). The largest community is Duluth in southern St Louis County with 43% (86,277) of the county population. Northern St Louis County, called the Iron Range, includes the cities of Hibbing (16,364), Virginia (8,700), Chisholm (4,976), and Ely (3,459) that are separated by up to 50 miles which represents approximately 17% of the total population. Many smaller scattered communities make up the rest of the population. St Louis County is unique due to its large geographic area and long distances between communities.

When implementing FHPAP, St. Louis County takes into account these distinct geographic and population characteristics. FHPAP goals and objectives are developed through guidance from the St Louis County Continuum of Care (CoC) Heading Home St. Louis County—the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, and the Heading Home St Louis County Leadership Council advisory committee which is made up of appointed members from across St Louis County including representation from the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa. The Affordable Housing Coalition and Homeless Response Committee (AHC-Duluth), which includes the City of Duluth Community Development Division, respond to urban homelessness issues in southern St Louis County, whereas the Iron Range addresses rural homelessness through the Rural Housing Coalition and Homeless Response Committee (RHC-Iron Range). Each coalition evaluates the diverse needs of its populations and guides the programs that will prevent homelessness, eliminate repeated episodes of homelessness, and minimize the number of days homeless. The long term vision is to integrate the FHPAP program into St. Louis County's homeless response system.

Developing a comprehensive homeless response system through coordination of all entities that provide homeless services is an innovative approach that responds to the overall needs of the community in a thorough and coordinated system. Through opportunities for County, City, service providers and the public to come together on a regular basis to address needs, gaps and trends of at-risk members in our community, the homeless response system will provide an integrated approach to ending homelessness in St Louis County. As all communities within the county move together toward fully integrated implementation, the overall focus will be alignment toward the Federal HEARTH Act goals and community development of a Coordinated Assessment procedure. It is expected full County-wide implementation will occur in two to five years.

In an effort to prevent or end homelessness in St. Louis County, FHPAP serves families with or without children, single adults, and unaccompanied youth. FHPAP provides direct cash and support services, such as housing referral and placement or landlord/tenant mediation. Provider services are available to households experiencing a housing crisis and needing short term assistance to find housing or prevent homelessness. To support low-income households needing to resolve a housing crisis and find stable housing, the project may also provide funds to pay security deposits, rent/mortgage assistance, or utility assistance.

In the current biennium, the numbers of individuals facing first time homelessness as documented by St. Louis County FHPAP HMIS data is more than twice that of the state. In addition, the current numbers indicate families with children are not accessing FHPAP providers at the same level as they are throughout the state. In response, this project will emphasize utilizing FHPAP funds to alleviate first time homelessness and to increase FHPAP access to families with children.

FHPAP providers are selected through a local Request for Proposal (RFP) process and must demonstrate the ability to allow access to services for singles, families with or without children, and/or unaccompanied youth. Involving family shelters in the program and building greater coordination with school districts to identify families that are doubled up, homelessness liaisons will help ensure that homeless youth and families are being served as needed. School district data in Duluth indicates a 15% increase in homeless students from 2010-2011 to 2011-2012 and similar statistics are emerging for the current year. Of the school-age children documented homeless in the local public schools, 33% are African American and 25% are American Indian; this means that over 50% of homeless school age children in the area are minorities in a city that is documented by 2011 US Census data as 90% white.

The strategy for this project is to improve outreach efforts for families while continuing to serve singles and unaccompanied youth, and to ensure all populations have information and access for FHPAP funding. To shorten family shelter stays, families will be targeted for screening and community support services. Culturally appropriate agencies will be chosen to ensure that the needs of African Americans and American Indians are addressed. Providing legal services in St. Louis County for homeless prevention will continue to be a unique component of the FHPAP program. This is accomplished through court eviction intervention and ongoing educational forums in the high schools and for landlords.

All providers will be required to leverage FHPAP funds with other resources to provide the maximum amount of support possible to keep clients housed. FHPAP funds are only offered after other mainstream resources have been explored. All participants must have a letter of denial from St Louis County emergency assistance programs prior to receiving FHPAP funds. All must be in housing crisis yet able to demonstrate the ability to remain stable after these funds are received. By leveraging resources, providing direct cash assistance, and offering support services if needed, such as placement or eviction intervention, FHPAP can evaluate participant needs and continue to increase housing stability and decrease first time homelessness.

All FHPAP applicants enter into the program by completing a general assessment of need. The Self Sufficiency Matrix will continue to be used as an assessment tool. All participants will be entered into the Homeless Management and Information System. Providers will continue to document turn-aways as a tool for continued evaluation of the program.

In conclusion, through receipt of FHPAP funding, St. Louis County will develop a comprehensive homeless response system to leverage funds that will increase service to families with children and change cultural disparities and provide homeless prevention assistance to reduce first time homelessness in our community.