

Homeless Health Community Initiative

Purpose: To address basic health needs of the homeless in metro Atlanta and to fill in the gaps of needs not met by agencies providing similar services.

Challenge: Housing and good health are fundamental human needs, yet a growing number of people in metro Atlanta live without a home and struggle with health concerns. Poor health can be the “hit” that tips the scales to homelessness for people already at risk because of poverty, lack of education, and the high cost of housing. Common health issues include:

- Mental illness
- Untreated addictive disorders
- Chronic physical and mental illnesses and disabilities
- Physical and mental injury from domestic violence

Being homeless also aggravates existing health conditions, makes recovery difficult, and burdens the community’s already scarce health resources.

Metro Atlanta Figures:

- 12,000 to 20,000 – number of individuals estimated homeless annually
- 6,956 – number of homeless individuals on one day in Atlanta’s first homeless census (2003)
- 20% of the homeless are chronic cases (homeless for more than one year)
- 87% – percentage of Atlanta homeless census respondents who were African-American men

Opportunity: Just as health contributes to homelessness, it can serve as a primary path out of life on the streets. Improving health ameliorates conditions that can undermine resilience and makes it more likely that a person can navigate the waters out of homelessness.

- **Ongoing medication and/or therapy** helps homeless individuals control symptoms of mental illness and stabilize so they can develop income sources and maintain housing.
- **Effective treatment and social support services** for addiction provides a foundation enabling homeless individuals to seek employment, develop relationships, and live productively.
- **Supportive housing** addresses health and social issues of chronically homeless individuals who face a combination of serious and/or chronic health problems. Programs integrate housing with medical, mental health, substance abuse, and case management services.

The frequency of health issues in paths to and from homelessness suggest that health can be one way to break down the “wicked problem” of homelessness into “small wins” and offer hope for progress.

Grantmaking: The Community Foundation’s Homeless Health initiative provided three-year grants (2006-2009) to groups of nonprofits that implement the concept of “small wins” through tangible and strategic activities to improve health of homeless individuals and create changes in health service delivery, organizational capacity, and/or homeless health policy. Promising approaches include:

- Increase supportive housing and related services
- Encourage reciprocity and coordination between mainstream and community-based programs
- Support and connect effective community-based programs
- Support policy change
- Build on assets and viewpoints of all stakeholders to develop solutions