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Housing plan unveiled

[By Ellen G. Lahr, Berkshire Eagle Staff](#)

PITTSFIELD — The only antidote to homelessness is a home. But to keep the chronically homeless housed requires support services and devoted case management. Berkshire County leaders, unveiling a 10-year plan to end homelessness yesterday, called for creating both housing and tightly coordinated support services for people who are on the streets or at risk of being there.

"Getting Home," a plan created by the Berkshire County Leadership Council working with area social service agencies, businesses and public officials, will first establish 15 housing units for the area's most vulnerable, chronically homeless people, many of whom are mentally ill or otherwise disabled.

Another 85 housing units will be set aside within the next five years, according to the council's leaders, Daniel Dillon, former president of Berkshire United Way, and state Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield.

The plan calls for intensive case management, deep subsidies to alleviate financial hardship, clinical intervention for the mentally ill and rapidly "re-housing" homeless people. It would be a massive collaboration among all the agencies and nonprofits currently dealing with the homeless, bringing together organizations like Soldier On, which works with homeless veterans, and the Berkshire Community Action Council, which runs the Barton's Crossing shelter in Pittsfield.

Implementation will involve countywide housing authorities' agreement to designate some units for homeless people, creation of new housing units and coordination among town officials, businesses, churches, advocates and government agencies, they said.

A "director of implementation" will be hired in the fall, according to the "Getting Home" goals. The council and its advocates — most notably Philip F. Mangano, who heads the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness in Washington — said the Berkshire plan reflects what advocates have finally confirmed with hard data collected from 500 communities nationwide: Providing chronically homeless people with housing and support services saves money and serves people best. Mangano said the newer philosophy of "housing first" is built around a business-like model that tracks results.

"You've created a realistic plan in Berkshire County with benchmarks around the single antidote to homelessness," said Mangano. "It's a plan that's oriented toward housing the most vulnerable neighbors in the county."

He said that in the last 21/2 years, cities such as Danbury, Conn., New York City, Quincy and Springfield have reduced their homeless populations by providing housing and support services in a coordinated manner.



Joe Madlin has earned a contractors' license while living at Soldier On, and does a lot of work.

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Dillon said the county's housing advocates have pinpointed 80 to 100 "chronically homeless" people who have mental illness, disabilities or addiction. These people frequently bounce between jail, hospital emergency rooms, shelters, social service agencies and the street.

Far more people are less visible, perhaps living with relatives or friends, periodically staying in shelters due to economic hardship or other troubles, Dillon said.

Downing said "there is no single cause for homelessness." Complex factors such as job loss, illness, foreclosures, heating fuel expenses and other troubles can combine to place many people at risk. He said the recent discussions have involved the president of Berkshire Health Systems, the Berkshire County district attorney, and the county sheriff, all of whom deal with homelessness in their venues.

The plan to deal with the problem, Downing said, is similar to the coordinated efforts of the Berkshire Compact for Higher Education, which has brought together leaders in business, education, government and workforce development in an effort to improve the county's educational services and job recruitment efforts.

Mangano said the federal government's funds for homelessness prevention and housing development have been increasing in recent years. He said \$1.5 million has come to Berkshire County from the Housing and Urban Development agency and veterans programs.

With a 10-year plan in place, Berkshire County is better positioned to increase its various funding options for homelessness prevention an intervention, he said.

Soldier On, a nonprofit veterans organization, has received millions in federal and state funds to support expansion of its housing options for homeless veterans in Pittsfield. Jack Downing, the agency's executive director, said the success of providing housing and direct support services simultaneously has already been proven with Soldier On's programs in Pittsfield and Leeds.