The struggle to end homelessness in Washington State

How do you go about ending homelessness?

For the past two decades, countless individuals and organizations across the U.S. have been committed to this effort. Billions of dollars have been spent, and millions of homeless people have been helped to secure stable long-term housing. Yet despite all these efforts, homelessness is still with us. Every day, about three-quarters of a million people in the U.S.—and approximately 25,000 people in our state—are homeless.

The good news is that right now a profound shift is taking place in Washington State as a result of the passage of the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act (HB 2163) during the 2005 legislative session. The bill was sponsored by Rep. Timm Ormsby of Spokane and signed into law on May 16th of last year. The big-picture approaches that communities are adopting as a result of this bill include system change, prevention, and housing first, all of which I'll discuss in the following pages. As you will see, there's a growing conviction that we're on the right track to meet the state's 10-Year Goal of reducing homelessness by 50%.

**EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT HOUSE BILL 2163 ARE GATHERING MOMENTUM**

Last month, I attended the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH) 16th annual conference in Yakima. The theme of the conference was “Putting the Pieces Together: Implementing Plans to End Homelessness.” The upbeat energy shared by participants and presenters was electric.

The overarching focus of the conference was on county plans set in motion by House Bill 2163. By the end of 2005, some 35 of 39 Washington counties had submitted individualized 10-year plans, signaling their participation in the work of ending homelessness. Many of these county plans are still in their infancy. Yet what I took away from Yakima, after speaking with dozens of the people involved, is that this bill is proving to be a powerful catalyst providing momentum for counties and municipalities—and helping to bring all the critical players to the table.

**HB 2163’S STRONG FOCUS ON SETTING GOALS AND TRACKING RESULTS**

House Bill 2163 is not a panacea. It is, however, a crucial step for Washington State. There are a number of great things about this bill. It’s very specific about accountability, about setting realistic, workable goals and tracking results. It is funded, not by taxation, but by county document recording fees. Though the bulk of the revenues go directly to the county that generated them, a portion of these revenues is dedicated to providing technical assistance to counties for creating plans and implementing them effectively.

HB 2163 also requires the formation of a statewide Interagency Council on Homelessness, appointed by Governor Gregoire, that brings together the directors of state agencies involved in areas that are linchpins to solving the homeless crisis. These include social and health services, corrections, veterans’ affairs, employment security, health, and financial...
management. Council members will be meeting on a regular basis to align policies and resources in these areas.

It’s been clear for some time that homelessness must be treated as a system-wide crisis that involves schools, jails, health care, substance abuse, and mental health facilities, and takes into account affordable housing, transportation, employment, and living wage issues. It has also been clear that we need to devote significant efforts to preventing homelessness. HB 2163 recognizes all of these issues and integrates them into its implementation and oversight framework.

BUILDING CAPACITY—AND SUPPORT—IN THURSTON COUNTY
Some Washington communities are well along in the process set out by HB 2163. Thurston County is one of these; Chris Lowell, director of the Housing Authority of Thurston County (HATC), was at the WSCH conference. “About three years ago we set the goal of reducing homelessness by 50% by 2005,” she told me. “We’re close to a 60% reduction already.”

In many ways, Thurston County, which includes the cities of Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater, is a poster child for how to approach the complexities homelessness advocates face. An essential ingredient is cultivating buy in.

“We’ve had support from our elected officials—the political will and support to make this happen. That’s key. You have to have support from the top,” Chris said. Our interview, in fact, was genially interrupted by Thurston County Commissioner Cathy Wolfe, also in Yakima for the conference. Cathy stressed the team efforts made by everyone across the spectrum in the county, from nonprofit community partners to residents to elected officials to county employees, alongside the visionary role Chris has played in her 16 years as housing authority director.

These are some of the other elements of Thurston County’s success in reducing homelessness:

Building capacity. “The need is never going to go away. We have to recognize that there will always be people in crisis and in need, and there will always be homelessness,” Chris said. To be successful, communities need to have the capacity to address these needs as they arise.

Housing first. The housing first model, increasingly embraced in communities across the U.S., starts from the premise that homeless people need to secure stable, relatively permanent housing right away in order to turn their lives around and break the homeless cycle. When homeless individuals and families are able to secure a stable home, they are then better positioned to benefit from the supportive services they receive.

Continuum of care. “What we’ve found is the importance of providing coordinated housing and services together. We try to serve people as much as possible as a community,” Chris said. To that end, Thurston County’s Home Consortium, which is chaired by Cathy Wolfe, meets together weekly to work on housing issues. The Consortium is the county’s ending-homelessness engine, and is made up of eight different jurisdictions in Thurston County. All of the county’s shelters and housing providers participate.

In terms of building capacity, HATC has been working with community partners to bring six projects on line in the next year that will add 130 units or beds. These include permanent housing units for homeless families with children; permanent housing units for at-risk youth; a project sponsored by Catholic Community Services for chronically homeless individuals that will provide both permanent units and shelter beds; 34 units of permanent housing for the chronically homeless mentally ill; and a remodel of the current shelter for victims of domestic violence, adding 12 new beds.

WHAT’S THE NEXT STEP FOR THURSTON COUNTY?
Refining services, for one thing. On Chris’ wish list is a respite shelter for homeless people who are too ill to be on the streets. “In most cases, shelters release people at 7 or 8 in the morning,” she says. “But when you have a
broken leg, or you’re sick, what do you do?” Chris would like to see a respite shelter area in Thurston County for individuals who need 24-hour care. It makes sense fiscally, in terms of reducing the sky-high costs of emergency room (ER) visits; it’s also the humane thing to do.

**SERENITY HOUSE’S EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN RURAL CLALLAM COUNTY**

Every Washington county presents a unique profile of demographics and needs in terms of ending homelessness. Clallam County, on the Olympic peninsula, has about one-third the population of Thurston County, and different resources. But one thing the two counties share in common is leaders who are passionate about ending homelessness. In **Clallam County, Kathy Wahto, executive director of Serenity House in Port Angeles** is leading the way.

“My agency is the lead agency for continuum of care planning, and by far the largest homeless provider on the whole peninsula. So we felt this was our role to undertake,” Kathy said. Serenity House was founded by two nurses about 25 years ago. The original program focused on recovery from substance abuse, but it has since evolved into a full-scale effort to provide housing and supportive services to all homeless populations.

Clallam County started working on its 10-year plan in 2003. To adhere to HB 2163’s requirements, some refinements were needed, but Clallam, like Thurston, had already hit its stride. “The commissioners have been involved with the plan, and cities as well. We’re in a fortunate position,” Kathy said. “A collaborative approach has been ingrained in the county.” At least 55 agencies and churches are very active in the effort to end homelessness. This network has been in place long before people started talking about a 10-year plan, meeting since 1989.

What else is working right in Clallam County? “Preventing homelessness is one of the four corners of our plan,” Kathy described. Serenity House coordinates with the entire network to intervene where needed to reach out to families or households who need help “before they get in too deep.” They’re building outreach connections to school districts, food banks, landlords, property owners, and police officers.

“Schools are useful. Teachers and administrators see kids in school whose families are struggling and don’t know what to do about it. We’re seeing the same kind of success rate that I hear from other organizations. With this kind of intervention, between 85 and 95% of people sustain and retain housing,” she said.

Kathy described how pleased she was to get a call from a police officer in Port Angeles, who had just tracked her down at the Yakima conference. He was worried about a man living in an alley, and sought help in making a referral. “Two years ago, that never would have happened. You can see this working on an individual level.”

Looking ahead, Kathy sees homeless single adults, who are often chronically home-

“The identified priority need probably common to all rural counties is homeless families with children”.

**KATHY WAHTO**, Executive Director of Serenity House in Port Angeles

On the Clallam County agenda is coordinating within the region on effective discharge planning, including neighboring Kitsap and Jefferson Counties. Often, hospitals and detox centers call Serenity House to try to arrange a shelter bed for someone being discharged—so that they don’t get discharged into homelessness. Ideally, Kathy said, planning would result in agencies working together to place someone in permanent housing upon discharge, “and that’s what we want to work towards. The relapse rate is huge.”
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A PROMISING WORK IN PROGRESS IN WASHINGTON’S LARGEST COUNTY

Last year, Bill Block quit his private-sector job to take on the formidable role of coordinating efforts to end homelessness in King County. His title is Project Director, Committee to End Homelessness—for a county that runs from Seattle to the Cascade Mountains. King County has about 8,300 homeless individuals on any given night and some 24,000 people who will experience homelessness this year.

King County’s 10-year plan got its start in 2001 when Seattle’s St. Mark’s Cathedral convened a conference on homelessness. The King County Plan submitted for HB 2163 was a refinement of the planning that has been more than five years in the making. I asked Bill for his perspective on how things were going in King County. “The committee to end homelessness is responsible for being the catalyst,” he said. “It’s become increasingly clear to Bill and other low-income housing advocates across the U.S. that the costs to the system of providing temporary fixes, like shelters and ER visits and tenures in jail, ultimately end up costing more than permanent solutions.”

Bill gave the example of the King County Jail. “It costs almost $300 per night to house a mentally ill prisoner,” he said. “The King County Jail is the second-largest mental institution in the State of Washington. You can take someone and house them in supportive housing where they won’t be in the situations that cause them to reoffend, for less money in many cases than it costs to jail them. In King County, we have a wonderful jail director who understands that, and is working very hard to figure out how you deal with this population in a way that both serves their needs and the needs of society.”

“Homelessness doesn’t lend itself to easy stories,” Bill asserted. “One of the things you need to understand is multiple barriers. If you’re an African-American male and you get a non-violent felony conviction, it’s a one-way ticket to homelessness.” He described a focus group he held with a large group of homeless African-American males. Their chief theme? “It was I want a job,” he told me.

On paper, the numbers are bigger, but King County’s approach isn’t all that different from Thurston or Clallam County’s: it’s a matter of concerted efforts. “One big piece that is going on in King County is the true integration of services in housing,” Bill said. “For many years, housing providers would provide housing, and the residents would need to sift through six or seven layers of service providers to try to find services. It’s now part of the program design, so that things are not done haphazardly—so you don’t have five different caseworkers.”

Bill, by the way, has been a tireless advocate for the homeless and for affordable housing for many years in various volunteer board capacities. I asked him what prompted him to leave his position as partner of the Seattle law firm Buck & Gordon to become project director for King County. The answer, he said, was twofold: “First of all, it’s really the first time everybody’s been at the table. There have been lots of plans to end homelessness in the past. But they were isolated—they were one jurisdiction, one group.”

Secondly, he said, before he took the job he made the rounds to see how seriously people were taking this new initiative to end homelessness. “And when I asked the City of Seattle departments, what’s your work plan? They had four goals, one of which is ending homelessness. United Way has two uses for discretionary dollars: One is early childhood education, and one is ending homelessness. The King County Department of Community and Human Services has ending homelessness as one of its priorities.”

“It really is a dedicated effort, not just a conversation,” Bill said.
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COMMON GROUND: A LITTLE FERTILIZER AND A FEW SEEDS

Lynn Davison, executive director of Common Ground, was also at last month’s WSCH conference. Common Ground is the agency that has contracted with the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED) as the lead technical assistance provider to counties implementing HB 2163. Common Ground holds a variety of roles in our state, but a primary focus for the past 25 years has been providing real estate development services to other nonprofit organizations to create affordable housing.

About a decade ago, Common Ground, first with HUD dollars, and now with CTED funding, also began to assist organizations in building the capacity to develop and manage housing. With Common Ground’s extensive experience in these areas, assisting counties in creating 10-year plans and refining and implementing their ending-homelessness strategies has been a natural fit. Common Ground is also providing assistance in the development of the State’s 10-year plan, which is also required by HB 2163—the final version of the state plan is due next month.

In terms of focus, every plan included housing-related strategies, and most plans have some focus on preventive approaches. Overall, Common Ground saw the most detail and focus on families, and the least detail in plans to provide for homeless youth.

Right now, Common Ground and a few sub-contractors are focusing their efforts on helping counties put effective models together, “to help communities who are wanting to take the next step: to implement. There are evidence-based best practices out there,” Lynn stressed. “These practices have been implemented all over the country—and here in Washington. We’re looking at a combination of two things: what we know works, and what communities say they are most interested in.”

She gave the example, common to most counties, of efforts to bring landlords and service providers and homeless people together. “In a lot of counties, there are landlords who haven’t had any experience renting to homeless people—who have concerns about that. We can help by pulling from other communities where they have had success. This world is all about learning from one other. While there are differences, some of these approaches can be adapted easily. And that’s our goal. If we can give counties the basics, then communities are fully capable of adjusting and doing what they need to do to make something work.”

For Lynn, one of the biggest values of HB 2163 has been “the broadening of community understanding and awareness.” She described a meeting where she’d just witnessed this with Yakima community partners. “The issue of homelessness is bringing together people who have not worked together before. People who knew each other, but really didn’t know what their organizations did—people from the justice system, health system, human services—through 2163 and just a little before that, they’ve recognized that there had to be a lot more players.

“I think we’re in quite a good launch position with 2163,” she concluded. “We’re providing a little fertilizer and a few seeds. Communities have to be invested in making it happen.”
CTED’S PRESCRIPTION FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Stephen Buxbaum has focused on community and economic development systems and policy for his entire career, with a strong focus on housing. As Assistant Director, Housing Division for CTED, he holds the pivotal oversight role for the implementation and delivery of HB 2163. I can think of no one more capable of taking this on. Stephen also chairs the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Stephen is working particularly hard to foster systemic change. HB 2163, although it will provide much-needed funding towards the work of ending homelessness, raises a relatively small pot of actual dollars, and he wants to help ensure that communities can make the most of them.

One of the most interesting revelations at the conference took place at workshops on HB 2163. Stephen announced that CTED had created a pool of $8 million to fund three to five projects, with the goal of underwriting efforts that will demonstrate systemic change: projects that can result in cost savings, reduce homelessness and be duplicated in other communities. $5 million will come from the state’s share of collected document recording fees as stipulated by HB 2163; the remaining $3 million will come from CTED HOME funds.

For those communities interested in submitting proposals, CTED made available specific details on this program earlier this month. An RFP will be released in August, with a 90-day response time; funding decisions will be made in December.

“Going for system change is always tough,” Stephen admitted. “But at the same time, how else will we really make a difference? I believe that’s what 2163 is all about: it offers us a tremendous opportunity to create new partnerships that will lead to different ways to provide services in housing for the homeless.

“We’ve got the methodology. We have some fairly separate and distinct needs between the urban, the more moderate-sized counties and our rural counties. We need to be very thoughtful about paying attention to the different needs that exist in those different contexts.”

Stephen believes that 2163 is an extraordinary act in that it is not highly prescriptive. “It directs what is expected in terms of results, but it doesn’t dictate how we get there,” he said. “It is masterfully written: it places responsibility on the state and on counties to come up with their own solutions. And I think that in taking that course, it recognizes the extraordinary diversity of challenges that we face. The ultimate thrust of 2163 is performance-based targeting of resources. The Act is very clear that we must place resources where the data is telling us that we’re getting results.”

Where does Stephen think resources are best targeted? He says that’s up to counties to determine. But he believes that having counties be in the lead, with flexibility given for large municipalities to also be direct participants, is a good formula. One staggering statistic he cited: there’s no county in the state that has less than 65% of its general fund operating dollars going to criminal justice. “What that says is that we are using local revenues to warehouse people. And we have to do something to turn that around.”

For Stephen, HB 2163 emerged from the current dialogue on homelessness as much as it has prompted it. “Over the last few years we have been moving from the concept of merely sheltering people and putting band-aids on things, to going to a very different kind of approach, which includes transitioning people into permanent housing. We’re really beginning to talk about a new kind of social contract, that respectfully gives people the opportunity to lead stable lives.”

“Going for system change is always tough. But at the same time, how else will we really make a difference?”

STEPHEN BUXBAUM, Assistant Director, Housing Division for CTED
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**REPRESENTATIVE MARK MILOSCIA’S PLEA FOR UNITY**

I’m going to give the last word in this article to Washington State Representative Mark Miloscia of Federal Way, who is one of our state’s most ardent and hard-working homeless advocates. Mark is Chair of the House Housing Committee and was a cosponsor of HB 2163. At his roundtable discussion held at the conference, Mark gave feedback to all the participants involved in the 10-year planning process. He offered both a rousing tip of the hat to the enormous efforts made thus far by counties, and a plea for continued diligence and unity in creating permanent solutions to homelessness.

Mark is holding counties up to exacting standards in their follow through with HB 2163, because he knows that’s the only way we’re going to get the job done. He’s holding himself up to the same high standards: he has actually read and assessed each county plan six times. He took particular care in recognizing two counties for the best 10-year plans: Thurston for the best large-county plan, and Clallam for the best small-county plan. And he discussed the major elements he thought were critical in creating and implementing successful 10-year plans for ending homelessness. These are some of the highlights:

**Prevention.** “The key to solving this problem is focusing on prevention, and the factors that cause homelessness. These need to be included in plans. We’re not going to build or tax our way out of this.”

**Action.** “Work groups need to meet at least monthly to evaluate success.”

**Recommendations.** “Counties must understand the gaps that exist. And they need to recommend funding sources, and how much money they need. I’m going to ask for more money next year. If you ask for it, you give me the strength to ask the legislature for it.”

**Identified principles and values.** “Do you really mean it? Has the county accepted responsibility and gotten community and business support? The people in Olympia who don’t care about this issue wish it would go away. If you have people on your board who don’t support your plan, fire them.”

**Results focus.** “We need the right results, and we need to hold ourselves accountable for them.”

“Affordable housing is only as strong as you make us,” Mark urged. “I need your help in getting all of our advocates working together. Please speak with one, unified voice. That’s where you get the power.”

“The key to solving this problem is focusing on prevention, and the factors that cause homelessness. We’re not going to build or tax our way out of this.”

MARK MILOSCIA, Washington State Representative
Nan Roman’s national perspective: Effective strategies across the U.S.

How does Washington State’s effort to end homelessness look from a national perspective? That’s the question I asked Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH). Unfortunately, Nan was unable to make the trip to the Yakima WSCH conference due to illness, but I caught up with her on the phone afterwards.

Because NAEH is located in Washington, D.C., Nan is well positioned to keep tabs on developments in different parts of the country. According to Nan, “Ending homelessness is about using resources more wisely and allocating them in smarter ways, which we’re now seeing in communities around the country. Places as different as Columbus, Ohio, Hennepin County, Minnesota and New York City are making progress and actually reducing the number of homeless people. A lot of that has to do with the availability of affordable housing.”

Nan pointed to three key strategies that are working consistently in a variety of situations across the country:

1. **Control of resources.** Are there enough resources available to create change? Frequently, the success of a program depends on who is driving the implementation and whether they have the resources needed to create systemic change—not only in the homeless system but other related systems, such as mental health, substance abuse, temporary assistance for needy families and child welfare.

   Coordinating efforts between multiple public and private agencies is always a challenge. As Nan noted, “If you only have advocacy groups doing the plan and not the city and institutions involved in it, then advocates have to get the city to adopt the plan; so the places where that’s done together obviously get started a lot faster.”

2. **Creative approaches to housing.** “If we had enough Section 8 housing subsidies that would pretty much solve the problem. Since we don’t, the answer,” said Nan, “is to invest a lot more in prevention. It’s not cost effective to build a big infrastructure for homeless shelters in every county or every town. It doesn’t make sense. I think prevention would solve a big percentage of problems, particularly in small towns and rural areas. There are places where housing finance authorities have put money into flexible pools for homeless prevention and rapid re-housing programs.” These creative approaches helped Hennepin County Minnesota reduce family homelessness by 43 percent from 2000 to 2004.

3. **Effective use of data.** It’s important to establish a baseline so you can measure results, drive processes and evaluate the effectiveness of programs.

   As Nan pointed out “it can be cost effective to get homeless people into housing faster. That’s the interesting twist on it.” She pointed to the example of Columbus, Ohio, where the installation of a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) enabled the city to determine that permanent housing was less expensive than supportive or transitional housing for families with fewer service needs.

   Nan said she’s not aware of any other state confronting the challenge of homelessness with a comprehensive legislative plan like House Bill 2163. She believes Washington State is well positioned to succeed because of the infrastructure and expertise we’ve built, together, over the years. “You already have so many pieces in place: You have high-functioning, high-capacity providers and people in government. You have the Gates Foundation and a lot of other philanthropy in the area, including businesses that are philanthropic. We just gave our award to Dan Bartlett from Car Toys who’s been engaged through United Way in your plan to end homelessness. You have a good solid tax base. The state is starting to get engaged through the Washington Families Fund. You now have this legislative plan 2163. You have so much: We’re going to be using your stats next year, I’m convinced.”

**About Us**

The Washington State Housing Finance Commission is a self-supporting agency that provides below-market financing to buy, build or preserve affordable housing and non-profit capital facilities. The Commission builds partnerships with the private sector to raise capital needed to further these social and economic objectives at no cost to the taxpayers of Washington State.

For more information about the Commission and its work, visit [www.wshfc.org](http://www.wshfc.org) or call 206-464-7139 or 1-800-767-HOME (4663) toll free in Washington State.