

# Fairfax County Makes a Dent in Homelessness but Much More Is Needed

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**Editor's note:** This is the final installment on an in-depth look at homelessness along the Route 1 corridor.

During early March's last gasp of winter, more than 70 homeless people slept, mainly on floors, at the two hypothermia centers along Rte. 1.

These are the "literally" homeless, the people who are counted in the annual national count of homeless people which numbered 1,225 in Fairfax County in January 2014. Behind them are many others in precarious housing situations, such as the 13,840 households making 30 percent or less of Fairfax County's average median income, and who do not have access to affordable housing.

These households are on the lowest economic rung of Fairfax County's "housing gap," estimated by the Virginia Center for Housing Research (VCHR) at Virginia Tech University. Although currently housed, they may be overcrowded, paying more than they can afford, and in danger of being thrown into homelessness by an illness or an unexpected bill, like several of the people in the first two articles of this series.

VCHR predicts that this group of extremely low-income Fairfax households will increase by 21 percent between 2012 and 2030.

## County Efforts

Since 2008, when Fairfax County declared its intention to end homelessness by 2018, it has reduced the number of literally homeless people by a third. It did so in the face of the 2009 recession in which many people lost jobs and homes and despite sequestration, which dried up the housing vouchers that supplemented rent payments for many.

Yet new forces are making more Fairfax residents vulnerable to homelessness than ever before. Rising housing prices, low wages, and changing demographics throughout the region are making it impossible for many families to live here without a subsidy. And the amount of subsidized housing in the county is woefully inadequate, according to all reports.

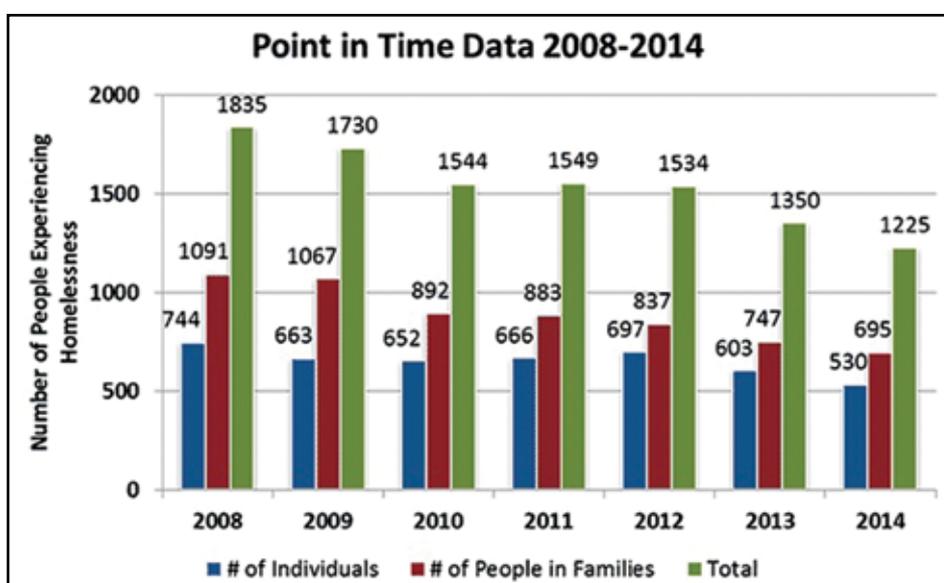
The county's official attention to homelessness was initiated by U.S. Rep. Gerry Connolly when he was chair of the Fairfax Board of Supervisors, following visits to homeless camps with activists. After adopting an ambitious 2008 plan to end homelessness in 10 years, Fairfax County set up an Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH) headed by Dean Klein, formerly with the Freddie Mac Foundation.

As the name implied, the office was to both end homelessness by finding homes for the 1,800 homeless people counted in 2008 and also to prevent others from becoming homeless by intervening with financial assistance to prevent evictions. It was also to increase integrated access to housing and services and increase the availability of permanent affordable housing.

As directed, Klein set up the mechanisms of a governing board, a consumer advisory committee of people who are or have been homeless, and an interagency group to better coordinate responses.

Over the first eight years, Klein said, his office reduced homelessness by one third and shortened the length of stays in homeless shelters prior to their being moved into housing; aligned federal and local dollars to strengthen their impact; strengthened partnerships with nonprofits; and coordinated local services through an access system so that people in need can call one number — 703-222-0880 — to be directed to services. The "222 number" as housing advocates call it, is a huge improvement, allowing callers to cut through the myriad of county services to the ones needed.

Between FY 2010 and FY 2014, the number of people moving from emergency shelters to permanent housing increased from 342 to 970; and



Graph/Fairfax County

**The literally homeless, those in a national "point-in-time" count of people in shelters on a given day in January, declined by a third in Fairfax County between 2008 and 2014.**

the average length of stay in shelters dropped from 93 days to 68 days for families with children, and from 72 days to 40 days for individuals, according to a county report.

The county's 10-year plan focused on "housing first," with additional substance abuse and mental health services added later as needed.

Fairfax's 2010 "Housing Blueprint" is a broader plan that goes beyond homelessness to affordable and workforce housing. It has three priority tiers: 1) homelessness and special needs, 2) low-income working families (e.g. people making less than half the average median income), and 3) workforce housing (e.g. people making up to 120 percent of the average median income).

## Finding Federal Funds

Fairfax has done well at procuring U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding over the years. A proposal for 28 agency and nonprofit projects was funded for \$7.6 million in January, a good showing compared with neighboring jurisdictions. In FY 2015, \$19.6 million (\$7.1 million in federal funds, and \$12.5 million in federal, state and local funds) were available to the county for housing and economic opportunities for low- and moderate-income people, according to Fairfax County's "Consolidated One-Year Action Plan" for FY 2015.

Years ago, HUD built public housing but none has been built in Fairfax since 1997. In 2014, 9,800 people were on waiting lists for public or assisted housing or residential human services. In addition, 321 individuals with mental illness and 889 individuals with intellectual disabilities were on wait lists for assisted living or housing with supportive services, according to the FY2016 Consolidated Plan.

As required by HUD, the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development, headed by Kurt Creager, develops five-year plans for the use of federal funds for housing and social services, as well as an action plan for the first year. The proposed Five-Year Consolidated Plan for FY 2016-2020 and the 2016 Action Plan are online at [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rha](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rha) and are being reviewed at a Board of Supervisors public hearing in March.

Specific plans for the next five years are to assist 250 homeless households and 100 households with special needs; and to provide 1,000 new rental units for low-income working families for a total of 1,350 units, or 4.3 percent of Fairfax County's current affordable rental housing gap of 31,360 homes for low income households — which includes the need for 13,840 units for households earning extremely low-incomes.

Under the last five-year plan, Fairfax County's housing programs provided 7,522 units/beds or

vouchers, according to the FY 2016-2020 Consolidated Plan, which noted that despite success of the last five-year plan in meeting its goals of addressing the housing needs of its citizens, "the housing affordability gap has increased."

The year after Fairfax's plan to end homelessness was adopted, Urban Institute researcher Mary Cunningham wrote this about the changing face of homelessness: "During the 1980s and 1990s when widespread homelessness emerged, the response came largely in the form of emergency shelter and transitional housing. At the time, most policymakers and advocates thought homelessness was a temporary problem — a result of the recession, the crack epidemic, and the deinstitutionalization of people with mental disabilities.

"Over time, largely because of a significant loss in affordable housing during the same period, homelessness became a permanent fixture in American society."

## The Economics

New Hope Housing Director Pam Michell said, "Many families face homelessness simply because the wages are too low and the rents are too high around here. A family cannot live on a single \$10-an-hour salary."

Actually it takes four minimum wage salaries, or an annual salary of \$56,480 (\$27.15 per hour), to afford a two bedroom apartment at the full market rate of around \$1,500 in Fairfax County, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition report *Out of Reach 2013*. (Assuming that that housing should cost 30 percent of one's income.)

The average median household income currently used by HUD for Fairfax County is \$107,000. One third of that is \$35,666, the top income for households in the extremely low-income housing category. Such a household would need to pay \$990 per month to be spending a third of its pre-tax income on housing. The Virginia Center for Housing Research calculates that 78 percent of the residents in this category pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing, thus are "cost burdened."

Housing costs are increasing much more rapidly than incomes, according to the FY 2016 Consolidated Plan, which said median gross rent increased 77 percent from 2000 to 2013, while median family and household income increased 35 percent.

## Continuum of Care

HUD's model, which is followed by Fairfax County, is to provide a "continuum of care" to move people from homelessness to market-rate housing whenever possible by providing supportive services like budgeting, counselling, mental health services, and job training. Clearly, some people will need continuing housing and support services, while others may achieve independence. "Some form of ongoing housing subsidy is es-



Photo/Mary Paden

**Andrew Rector and the other 19 residents of Mondloch Place had to spend a month in temporary housing after the pipes burst and damaged some apartments. He said if he had money he would build a country house with all services provided to help hundreds of homeless people.**

sential, but the demand for subsidized housing far exceeds the supply. The largest gap, and the greatest need in the Continuum of Care, continues to be the need for permanent affordable housing," according to the FY 2015 Consolidated Report.

## Rte. 1 Development

As Rte. 1 develops around new metro stops planned for Beacon Mall and Hybla Valley, density will increase, but so will rents. Development may bring jobs and better transportation, but is unlikely to deliver more affordable housing unless an effort is made to retain and increase affordable units.

Lee District Supervisor Jeff McKay wants to build affordable housing throughout the county, not just along Rte. 1. "We don't want to perpetuate low income neighborhoods," he said. "We want to diversify the housing and also diversify the schools. We have schools along Rte. 1 with 80 percent of their students on free and reduced price school lunch programs, whereas schools in other parts of the county have 10 percent or none. It is better for the students to attend schools with more mixed family income levels."

The county is also building affordable housing on the campus of the government center, in McLean, Tyson's Corners, Reston, and elsewhere.

McKay praised Mondloch Place, the recently renovated home with small apartments for 20 individuals needing continuing services and called for more "quality units" of affordable housing especially in high density areas. He cited the Shelby at Penn Daw as a new development that included some affordable units, but acknowledges that Fairfax County's "affordable dwelling unit" ordinance needs an overhaul. It requires that new developments with more than 50 units include affordable housing, but most new developments are smaller than 50 units. Still, supervisors can press developers to add affordable units if they require a zoning density change.

The affordable units are usually smaller versions of the regular units, McKay said.

The county specifications for the North Hill housing to be built on HUD-purchased land on Rte. 1 calls for only 35 of the 350 units to be affordable to the lowest income category.

Rev. Keary Kincannon, whose Rising Hope Church accommodates one of the Rte. 1 hypothermia centers, said, "We need the political will for higher density housing, smaller units (like residential studio units), and a living wage. That would put more people in housing with the resources available. Fairfax already has a commitment to 'housing first' but not enough resources for the need."

Meanwhile "living in overcrowded conditions remains a problematic solution to a lack of affordable housing for many households," according to the FY 2016 Consolidated Plan.