

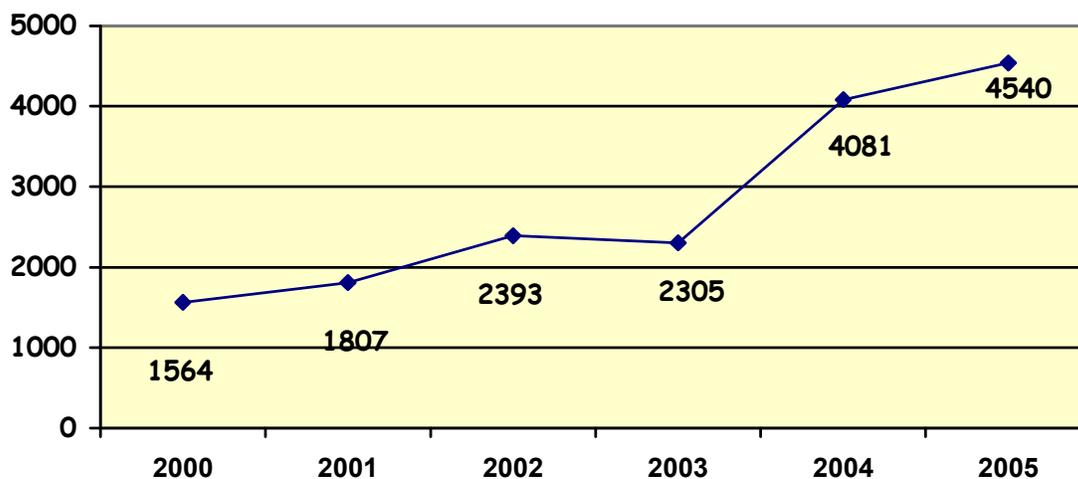
5 *The Challenge to End Homelessness*

While Pinellas County is generally considered to be a prosperous community, with a strong economy, diverse communities, low unemployment, and quality educational and cultural programs, a variety of factors have contributed to business and job losses, and escalating housing costs. These conditions, and a myriad of others as well, contribute to the number of people in the community who are homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless. Although a variety of programs exist to try and address the problem, the challenge is so significant and the reasons for homelessness so diverse, that there is not one solution. But the Board of County Commissioners took a bold step in 2004 when they announced the formulation of the Homeless Policy Group, tasked with developing a *Ten Year Plan To End Homelessness In Pinellas County*.

CURRENT SITUATION

As of 2005, according to the Pinellas County Homeless Policy Group, on any given night in Pinellas County, there are more than 4,000 homeless people in the community. These are men, women, and children who, for whatever reason, have no place to live. During the 2005 annual homeless survey, 4,540 people were homeless in Pinellas County, including 3,655 adults and 885 children. **Figure 3** below shows a 35% increase in the number of homeless people in Pinellas County from the year 2000 to 2005. While there is no single reason why the number of homeless has increased so greatly over this five year period, the housing boom during this time period may be responsible for a portion of the problem.

FIGURE 3
Number of Homeless in Pinellas County by Year



Source: "Opening Doors of Opportunity: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Pinellas County."

For example, during the past few years, a number of apartment units were converted into condominiums and nearly 5,000 mobile home units were lost when mobile home parks were demolished and redeveloped, often into high-end townhomes, condominiums, etc. Once displaced, lower income residents face a significant challenge in obtaining affordable housing – and it is likely that a number of them found themselves faced with few options other than living on the streets.

The price of homes in Pinellas County escalated at record rates during this time, and affordable, quality housing became a fading reality for many low to moderate-income households. Over the past several years, the “affordability gap” (the difference between what a person can afford and what is actually available) clearly grew larger.

In Pinellas County, the “chronic” homeless are of particular concern. Homeless citizens are considered “chronic” homeless when they have been homeless for more than one year or they have experienced four or more episodes of homelessness in three years. Approximately 3,000 of the homeless surveyed had previously experienced homelessness. This is significant because it is the chronically homeless who require the greatest amount of services provided for the homeless. This group of homeless people can be found regularly using shelters and soup kitchens, instead of during times of emergency only (a Homeless Shelter Inventory is included as **Appendix B**). Those citizens who find themselves chronically homeless represent a greater challenge to the ability to provide medical care, food and shelter.

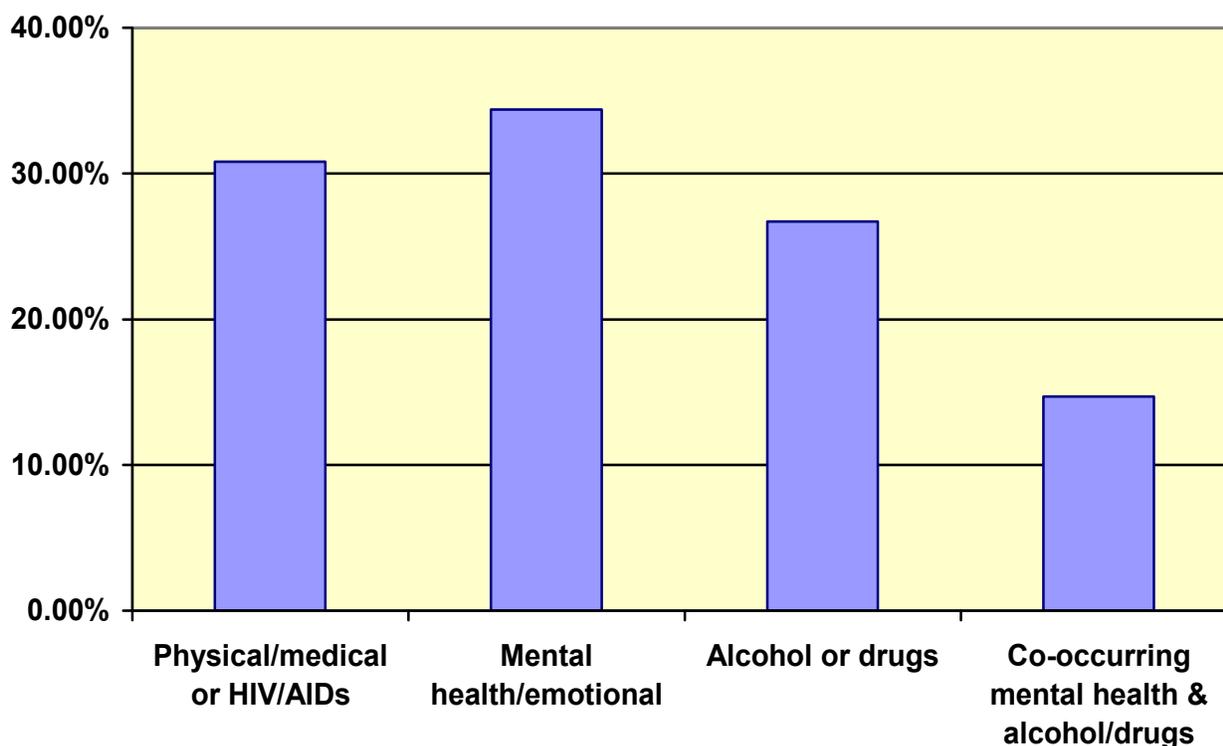
While Pinellas County has an existing array of services to assist the homeless population in regaining self-sufficiency, it is not sufficient to curtail this growing problem. The number of shelter beds and the amount of money spent on homelessness in Pinellas County has increased in the past five years - unfortunately, so has the number of individuals and families who become homeless, and hundreds of homeless people continue to sleep on the streets and in other places not meant for human habitation.

In addition to a growing homeless population, the face of homelessness has changed over the years. Because of many social factors, including those already described, homelessness and chronic homelessness has not only increased, but now includes more families with children, nontraditional family types, and a greater number of working poor households.

In addition to the changing housing market, there are several other underlying factors that can push people into homelessness. Most common among them are insufficient income to meet basic needs, alcohol and drug problems, physical and behavioral health issues, and domestic violence. Many homeless people lack problem solving and coping skills that prevent them from overcoming burdens and barriers that first put them at risk. The most recent Pinellas County homeless survey (2005) found that of the 3,655 adults who are homeless on any given night, 45 percent have some type of disability. These populations include physically disabled persons; adults with mental retardation and/or developmental disabilities; adults with serious mental illness, substance use and co-occurring disorders; and young people ages 18 to 22 transitioning out of foster care. These numbers further complicate the homeless situation in Pinellas County. While people with such disabilities are able to live successfully in their own homes and communities, they often require additional assistance and aid in order to do so. Fundamentally, there are currently insufficient resources in Pinellas County to provide the support needed for the homeless population.

FIGURE 4

Disabilities Among the Homeless in Pinellas County



Even though insufficient income is cited as the most common reason for homelessness, more than 33% of homeless adults work full or part-time, and about 23% receive disability, veteran or retirement benefits. Despite these sources of income, low wages or other personal or environmental barriers have led them to the streets or into shelters. Many homeless people are also caught in a legal dilemma: they cannot find employment without having a legal address and a legal address can only be obtained if they can afford to pay rent.

HOMELESS POLICY GROUP

In 2002, President Bush called upon communities throughout the nation to develop strategic plans to end chronic homelessness in ten years. This initiative has received bipartisan support and has been endorsed by both the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National Association of Counties. Special federal funding, through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Veterans Administration is being made available to communities that have successfully implemented 10-year plans to end chronic homelessness. In addition, communities that presently receive HUD funding for homeless programs have been advised that HUD grants in future years will be determined, at least in part, by the efficacy and success of their 10-year plans.

On July 25, 2004, a meeting was held with representatives from Pinellas County, the Cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater to discuss how to begin the process of developing a 10-year plan. The mission of this group became to develop and implement a countywide 10-Year strategic plan to end homelessness. From this meeting the Homeless Policy Group was developed, consisting of elected officials, law enforcement representatives, School Board representatives, and business and non-profit representatives from the community.

This group was developed as a planning body, to be a source of credible information and policy direction on homeless issues for the public bodies represented on the Policy Group. The role of the Group is to address homeless issues from a policy perspective, and to gain a full and broad range of community perspectives by reaching out and soliciting the views of other stakeholders who may not be represented in the Group. In 2006, the Policy Group completed a document titled: *Opening Doors of Opportunity: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Pinellas County*. This document highlights key initiatives and strategies for implementation that will assist the County in ending homelessness in the coming decade. This plan also outlines those barriers to ending homelessness, possible solutions to overcome such obstacles, and potential community partnerships that would assist in this goal.

SOME STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Continuum of Care (CoC)

In the homeless services arena, CoC generally refers to a graduated service loop that includes: prevention, outreach emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing and permanent housing, and returns to prevention to prevent further homelessness. Supportive services (e.g. mental health and substance abuse counseling, legal and health services, etc.) underpin the deeper-end services in the Continuum. The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness also stresses this Continuum as critical to the success of ending homelessness in Pinellas County.

In Pinellas County, resources are lacking in all areas of the CoC, but the small amount of funding and service delivery effort has been paid to prevention, outreach and permanent housing solutions. Based on available data and input from all segments of the homeless service community, these have been identified as the areas that require the greatest attention and improvement to end homelessness in Pinellas County.

While emergency shelter and transitional housing are still essential, these components are more available than prevention-focus programs. Important to the success of ending homelessness, are initiatives to keep people from entering the homeless system of shelter and services. Thus prevention should receive greater emphasis in Pinellas County.

Housing First Model

“Housing First” is a service delivery model that has proven successful in reducing homelessness in communities throughout the nation. The “Housing First” model focuses on placing individuals and families into permanent housing, as quickly as possible, and then providing intensive home-based case management and stabilizing support services to prevent a recurrence of homelessness. This model is addressed in the *10-year Plan to End*

Homelessness in Pinellas County and will be considered for implementation by Pinellas County in the near future.

EXISTING HOMELESS SERVICES

Service providers do help many homeless people escape homelessness each year; however, there are always more waiting for assistance. Below is a sampling of the services available to the homeless population in Pinellas County.

Homeless Leadership Network

A not-for-profit community-based organization, the Homeless Leadership Network provides a wide range of services to the homeless in Pinellas County. The Network provides public education, advocacy, program support, capacity building, and technical assistance to the homeless service community. According to the Network's website, the "ultimate goal is to end homelessness." The Network provides a vital service to the homeless by providing basic necessities, life education skills, social service references, medical and dental care, counseling and homeless prevention services. The Network has collaborated with Pinellas County Emergency Management to develop a plan to evacuate the homeless in times of emergencies, and by providing transportation to evacuation shelters in northern, middle and southern portions of the County. The Homeless Leadership Network also facilitates five standing committees in order to advocate for the homeless and to impact decision-making in Pinellas County in regards to homeless issues.

Catholic Charities

In 2007, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners has approved a grant for the creation of **Pinellas Hope**, a temporary community for the homeless during the winter months. The community will provide shelter to the homeless in tents while providing social and medical services, and assisting residents with employment and housing. Catholic Charities, in conjunction with a number of other local community groups, will operate the community, providing residents showers, bathrooms, and tents for shelter. The community is located close to a bus stop with service to Pinellas County Social Services and St. Vincent DePaul.

St. Vincent DePaul

St. Vincent DePaul has undertaken a number of initiatives to assist the homeless in Pinellas County. The organization operates a soup kitchen for the homeless in downtown Clearwater and the Center of Hope in St. Petersburg. At the Center of Hope, St. Vincent DePaul provides case management, permanent housing, employment readiness, group and individual counseling, substance abuse and mental health treatment, job training and placement, computer and literacy training, and financial and benefit planning, among other things. Proceeds from the organization's community thrift stores and donations fund the operations of the organization. In early 2007, St. Vincent DePaul also provided a vacant piece of their property to be used as a temporary tent/shelter area for the homeless, while providing services to those staying on the site.

Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project (CHIP)

CHIP has a facility located near downtown Clearwater and provides a variety of essential services to the homeless population in Pinellas County. This organization provides restrooms, showers, laundry facilities, telephones, personal item storage, message service and

counseling services. CHIP also offers a housing program. For those that opt to leave the streets and commit to the shelter program, they receive full-time employment, group and individual treatment, case management, a mandatory savings plan, job training and financial counseling. According to the organization's website, during the year from 2002 to 2003, CHIP provided shelter to 1,058 adult men, 328 adult women, and 82 children. CHIP provides both emergency shelter services and a daytime outreach program, which serves an average of 100 people daily.

ENDING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS IN PINELLAS COUNTY

The chronically homeless present the County's most difficult challenge, as they comprise a large percentage of the homeless population and must continuously rely upon social aid and services for their livelihood. In order to end homelessness, Pinellas County will have to enhance those services which prevent homelessness and seek to remedy the causes of chronic homelessness. The recently completed *10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*, developed by the Homeless Policy Group, should provide the policy foundation from which County community stakeholders should base future strategies and actions.