

# The Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness Initiative



by Rose Phillips

When the Obama administration released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* in 2010, it was a watershed moment. In advocating a “Housing First” approach, the plan embraced a paradigm shift that had emerged during the past

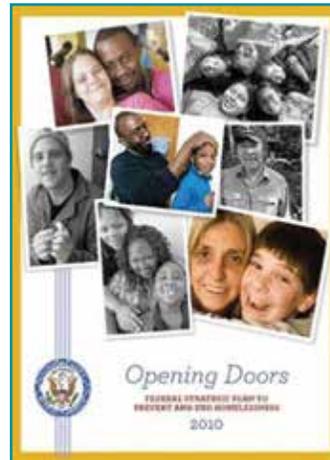
decade among service providers and advocates for the homeless. Building on the Bush administration’s success in housing 30% of the nation’s chronically homeless population, *Opening Doors* recommends extending the Housing First strategy for other homeless subpopulations, including veterans, families, and youth. Moreover, the plan provides a framework for channeling “mainstream” public benefits more efficiently to serve those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness<sup>1,2</sup>.

The Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness (DOEH) Initiative is best described as a “road test” of the *Opening Doors* framework in key communities across the nation. In September 2012, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH),

launched the initiative in 10 communities: Atlanta, Chicago, Fresno County (CA), Los Angeles County, Houston, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Phoenix / Maricopa County,

Seattle, and Tampa. These communities were chosen because they contain large homeless populations; half are among the top 10 in the nation for homelessness rates<sup>3</sup>. Each community and its federal partners are working to implement the *Opening Doors* framework, and the experience gained will inform efforts to end homelessness across the nation<sup>4</sup>.

## What is the DOEH Initiative?



To understand the DOEH Initiative, it is necessary to understand the *Opening Doors* plan. *Opening Doors* recognizes systemic causes of widespread and persistent homelessness: loss of affordable housing stock, failure of wages and public benefits to keep up with the cost of living, and a push to deinstitutionalize mentally ill. Rather than

proposing substantial new funding to address these causes, the plan encourages stakeholders to make more efficient use of existing mainstream benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing subsidies, and job search assistance. First, communities are urged to “break down the silos,” bringing together providers of disparate social services; officials from local, state, and federal government; nonprofits; and business leaders. Second, public benefit providers are advised to target a portion of existing resources to homeless and at-risk populations, and to identify and remove barriers to access.

The DOEH Initiative does not provide participating communities with extra funding or priority status for grants. However, in each community, officials from the nearest HUD or USICH regional office play an active role in the planning and collaboration process called



*The plan encourages stakeholders to make more efficient use of existing mainstream benefits.*

for in Opening Doors. As representatives of agencies that provide many of the critical “mainstream” benefits, these officials help identify barriers to extending benefits to homeless and at-risk individuals. If a program regulation is identified as a roadblock, the agency representatives may help the community apply for a waiver. An active federal presence helps to motivate a fragmented set of stakeholders to come to the table <sup>5,6</sup>.

The Opening Doors framework encourages communities to use evidence-based strategies and target resources where they will have the most impact. To achieve these goals, DOEH communities were provided with a “Strategic Planning Guide” (SPG), an Excel-based model that predicts the effects of various policies on different homeless subpopulations. The SPG is not sophisticated enough to model the long-



*Philadelphia has a September 30 deadline to achieve results from the DOEH initiative.*

term costs and benefits of the Opening Doors approach (e.g. freeing up funds for affordable housing and income support programs as homelessness is reduced). Still, it is likely

to be a powerful tool in persuading stakeholders to dedicate resources to fighting homelessness <sup>7,8</sup>.

### The DOEH Initiative on the Ground: Community Case Studies

Progress on the DOEH Initiative varies among the participating communities, but is generally in the preliminary stages. The communities are given flexibility to select high-priority subpopulations and adapt the Opening Doors plan to local circumstances<sup>9</sup>. The experience of three cities—Philadelphia, Houston, and Chicago—demonstrates how the DOEH Initiative builds upon and strengthens existing best practices.

#### Philadelphia

Philadelphia is considered a model for reducing street homelessness using a Housing First approach<sup>10</sup>. The

City’s DOEH Initiative builds upon these efforts, and mirrors the Opening Doors goal of ending chronic homelessness and veteran homelessness by 2015. The city has set a deadline of September 30, 2013, for realizing tangible results from the initiative. The DOEH Steering Committee has five subcommittees, which closely reflect the themes of Opening Doors: Communication, Creating Income, Housing Creation and Preservation, Physical Health, and Veterans’ Housing. The process is still in its infancy—each subcommittee has met only once or twice. However, a recent meeting of representatives from HUD, city and state agencies, and affordable housing developers resulted in a commitment to build 100 new housing units targeted to high-priority homeless populations. Finding new funding for such initiatives, or redirecting existing funding, remains an ongoing challenge<sup>11,12</sup>.

#### Houston

When the DOEH Initiative was launched, Houston had already initiated a process very similar to the one advocated in Opening Doors. The city had created a strategic plan to end chronic homelessness, was receiving extensive technical assistance from HUD, and had even created a model similar to the Strategic Planning Guide. As a result, Houston has actually entered the implementation phase of the DOEH Initiative. For example, 2,500 units of permanent supportive housing for targeted homeless populations are currently in the pipeline<sup>13</sup>. Houston demonstrated its commitment to the collaborative spirit of DOEH by hiring a full-time Executive Assistant to the Mayor for Homeless Initiatives<sup>14</sup>.

#### Chicago

In 2003, Chicago released *Getting Housed, Staying Housed*, a 10-year plan to end homelessness that received accolades from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. The plan emphasized Housing First, homelessness prevention and



*Chicago has seen success using the Housing First homeless prevention model.*

# Paul's Place Provides Supportive Housing



The Boley Centers opened Paul's Place, April 19. Paul's Place is their newest HUD 811 facility, located in unincorporated Pinellas County. The land for this project was acquired with funding from Pinellas County Department of Community Development HOME financing and construction was funded through the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development.

There are two buildings for a total of nine units of permanent supported housing for individuals who have mental disabilities and very low income. The Supported Housing service overlay is provided by the State of Florida's Department of Children & Families through Central Florida Behavioral Health

Network. These services help residents maintain their independent living by providing access to all necessary treatment, services and supports. Furnishings for the apartments were paid for through the generosity of the Boley Angels.



Paul V. Misiewicz

The Boley Centers are proud to have named this property after their longtime Board Member, Paul V. Misiewicz. Paul loyally served on the Board of Directors since 1988. During that time, he held numerous offices, including Chairman of the Board, Chairman of the Finance Committee and Executive Committee Member. **HNN**

## The DEOH Initiative continued from page 13.

rapid re-housing, and targeted housing subsidies to homeless and at-risk individuals, with considerable success. Chicago's Plan 2.0, a seven-year plan to end homelessness released in late 2012, continues this approach and incorporates many of the themes of Opening Doors, including outreach to homeless youth and better coordination of employment assistance for homeless clients<sup>15,16</sup>. Similar to Philadelphia, Chicago's DOEH Initiative is in the early stages. The DOEH team, comprised of representatives from HUD, USICH, and the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, recently held their first meeting with "external stakeholders," including local nonprofits and the Chicago Housing Authority<sup>17</sup>. The DOEH Initiative's emphasis on collaboration is explicitly recognized as an asset to this coalition-building effort<sup>18</sup>. **HNN**

## Endnotes:

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