

September 24, 2009

Effort to help homeless gets big boost from stimulus funds

Claudia Vargas
Staff Writer

Each year in Monroe County, about 7,500 adults and children go through the doors of homeless shelters, and with the economic crisis, those numbers could be even higher this year.

But come November, Rochester and Monroe County will start using the \$4.5 million approved in stimulus money for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing program to prevent those homeless numbers from increasing and to help those who already are homeless find stable housing.

The one-time funding will last three years with the condition that 60 percent of the money is used in the first two years, said Carol Wheeler, manager of housing in the City's Department of Neighborhood and Business Development.

The millions of dollars going into the locally named "Heading Home" project, which was announced Wednesday during the eighth annual Western New York Homeless Symposium, will be managed and coordinated by Coordinated Care Services Inc., a not-for-profit management services firm that specializes in behavioral health and human services.

Wheeler said that planning started several months ago, and the city and county worked with community agencies to come up with a model on how the money would be used.

Once a model was in place, several agencies responded to the request for proposals, but CCSI was chosen, Wheeler said, because of its experience in the community and in managing projects.

Wheeler said each year, Monroe County receives about \$400,000 for homeless shelters and other homeless services, and receiving more than \$4 million is a large boost.

"The goal is to help more people from losing housing and help them become stable," she said.

Donald Vacanti, of CCSI and the Heading Home program manager, said the program is a work in progress, so some of the details on how the money is used might change as people are referred for assistance.

The current plan is that 45 percent of the money will go toward prevention, which would be short-term financial assistance to help people avoid becoming homeless. Then 55 percent of the money would go toward rapid re-housing to help people living on the streets find housing.

All the housing will be rentals, Wheeler said, and the rent, utilities and other bills that the program can pay for will be paid directly to the landlord and billing agencies.

Though the criteria to apply for the program will be broad, Vacanti said, not everyone will qualify to receive help from these funds.

"Our challenge will be finding those families that will succeed in the program," Vacanti said.

CCSI officials are estimating that about 1,000 people will be helped during the first year of Heading Home.

Additional Facts

Stimulus project

Project: "Heading Home," also known as the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing program.

How much: \$4.5 million.

Status: Money has been approved and the contract has been signed. The start of the project is scheduled for early November.

Who benefits: The homeless in Monroe County and people who are at risk of becoming homeless.
