

**COMMUNITY ACTION**

Cayuga County works hard to prevent homelessness

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For more than 40 years, Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency has provided programs to assist low-income families and individuals throughout Cayuga County. In recent years, our community has seen a sharp rise in families and individuals, including unaccompanied youth, who are facing homelessness and few resources to address their needs. The noticeable increase in homelessness has given rise to a number of programs offered by the agency that provide homeless intervention services designed to help our customers locate and, most importantly, maintain permanent housing. The agency's family development component currently operates several distinct programs designed to address the immediate crisis of homelessness by assisting customers with emergency housing, locating permanent housing and providing staff support for up to two years that can help customers with the necessary skills to remain permanently housed. In 2012, the agency was awarded funding through the New York State Supportive Housing Program to operate a transitional living program to serve homeless young adults ages 18 to 25. The program provides housing in a supported living environment where program participants can work on goals and receive case management services for up to two years in preparation for securing future permanent housing.

The agency's success in administering our housing programs would not be possible without the collaborative relationships we maintain with our sister organizations that include the Cayuga County Department of Health and Human Services, Rescue Mission, Auburn Housing Authority, Options for Independence, Chapel House, Cayuga Counseling Services and the city of Auburn, among others, who provide referrals, specialized services and often dollar-for-dollar matches that can make the difference between a customer securing housing or remaining homeless. Much of the collaborative work across organizations is facilitated through monthly Homeless Task Force meetings that provide a forum for participating organizations to discuss customer needs, available services and service delivery; to identify gaps in services; and to brainstorm new and innovative methods to serve the growing homeless population within the county. Anyone interested in attending a Homeless Task Force meeting is welcome: the general committee meets bi-monthly and the next meeting is scheduled for 10 a.m. March 11 in the City Council meeting area at Memorial City Hall.

Services available to meet the needs of the homeless continue to broaden, with programs available for families, individuals, the disabled, veterans and young adults older than 18, but there is more work to be done as homeless numbers continue to rise. A gap continues to exist for youth younger than 18 when family circumstances, mental health and/or behavioral issues surface that make it no longer possible for them to live at home. Youth between the ages of 16 and 18 are most vulnerable; as once-stable housing is no longer available, school attendance often becomes sporadic, leading to dropping out. Without the structured school environment, youth may exist under the

radar, without the knowledge and skills to get back on track and, unfortunately, without needed programs to assist with this process. Sadly, without supports, many youth become involved with the juvenile justice system, serve jail time and, once released, find themselves again without the necessary supports to address the issues leading to homelessness.

The agency is currently looking to partner with local organizations both public and private to address the service gap that exists within the youth population. We seek to develop programming that can provide services such as case management and transitional housing to serve youth who surface as homeless so they may regain stability and begin to rebuild their lives. In addition, the agency continues to seek out resources to expand our existing programs and ultimately eradicate homelessness in Cayuga County.