

**Okaloosa Walton Homeless Continuum of Care/
Opportunity, Inc.**

**Executive Director's Report
February 1, 2010**

While December and January may normally be considered light work months, given the presence of the holidays, they were anything but for staff at Opportunity, Inc. The stress and pressure created by deadlines set by funding agencies was considerable, and most of the staff worked on every holiday and weekend. One employee simply walked off the job, and another was terminated when demands became literally overwhelming. On a bright note, they were immediately replaced by two staff members who are doing a stellar job at data entry, office management, and case management.

Point-in-Time Survey:

As per HUD and DCF mandates, the annual point in time count has just been completed. We used a different approach this year, enlisting the help of highly dependable and hard-working homeless, formerly homeless, intermittently homeless, and near homeless men and women. We gave them \$1 coupons from local fast food restaurants, and set them loose in designated areas with point-in-time count tools and long-form surveys. The results have been amazing. Keli found a woman in Crestview who takes in 20-25 homeless persons into her home, and has for years. Other homeless persons have taken up residence not within abandoned buildings, but on the roofs. We have found pockets of Hispanics, migrant workers, and other hard-to-locate groups. I spot-checked the various designated areas, and found either the surveyors or persons who had been surveyed. Over the next week or two we will be receiving reports from stakeholders who did their own point-in-time counts at cold night shelters, at soup kitchens, etc., or who have other valid means of identifying homeless clients. Everything has to be checked to ensure non-duplication, but we hope to have a full report by the March meeting. Meanwhile, we have surveyors making reports at the meeting today.

Muscogee Creek Nation:

Thanks to the outreach of the Walton County School District and members of the Continuum of Care network in Walton County, we have both learned of the crisis facing the Muscogee Creek Nation, and begun organizing support systems. DCF has begun signing families up for food stamps and Medicaid, Generous Heart has been ensuring ongoing utility payments, and many have been bringing food and clothing. Keli and I will be going out to the reservation on Tuesday, and will have a better idea of what the status is, what needs to be done, and what we can do to help. Thanks to the many of you who have responded.

Cold Night Shelters:

It is not news to anyone that January has been extraordinarily cold this year. The response from churches and volunteers has been heroic. One good result is that the city of DeFuniak Springs opened the first cold weather shelter in Walton County, staffed by the city, county, Red Cross, and local churches. Many thanks to all of you.

Homeless Prevention/ Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) Fund:

One of the interesting features of this grant is that one cannot request a second quarter draw until the first quarter draw has been completely depleted, which occurred December 31. Another feature is that the state and federal governments have targeted this program for intense scrutiny, so completed invoices (accompanied by hundreds of pages of documentation) go through three levels of screening before being approved for payment. Our invoice has gone through all the hoops and been approved, and we expect our second draw of \$124,041 by the end of this week.

Also part of the intense scrutiny is a heightened level of monitoring. In December, we learned that we were scheduled to be monitored January 20. The scope of the monitoring visit was not disclosed, leading us to assume that every phase of the program should be in pristine shape. The backlog of applications and the wait for the first draw had led to filing systems that varied by case manager, so the first task was to make sure that each file looked the same across the board, and that all documentation was included in all of them. The amount of required documentation is vast, and at the outset of the grant, ever-changing, so this project was also difficult.

Adding to the complete elimination of holiday time off (and some elimination of holiday spirit) was the requirement that all files be converted to HMIS by January 4, 2010. This would not have been an issue, except that the HMIS system did not come on line until December 18, and entering data was not the only thing anyone had to do. Even my husband joined us for the New Year's weekend, spending 12-14 hour days copying records and entering data.

On the positive side of the ledger, the auditors were very impressed by our fiscal controls, precautions against fraud, use of the HMIS system, our corporate policies and procedures, our HPRP policies and procedures, and our general approach to screening clients and determining eligibility. One of the auditors said this was one of the best set-ups he had ever seen. Both auditors had come in with a high level of skepticism, based on our small size. They left full of compliments. The HPRP policy and procedure manual was largely the result of work by Keli Cummings, who did a fantastic job of organizing it and pulling together all our forms and intake procedures.

Opportunity Place:

Opportunity Place has continued to generate excellent publicity and community interest, and the results at Christmas were striking. We received assistance from scores of groups, including the Christmas Connection, Hooters in Crestview, Trinity United Methodist Church, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Walmart, Wachovia Bank, Toys for Tots, Sams Club, to name only a few. We were not only able to provide a fantastic Christmas for our residents, but for former residents, recipient of homeless prevention and rapid rehousing funds, families assisted through Foster Families of America in Crestview, clients of Sharing and Caring in Crestview. All told over 100 families in both counties received clothes, food, cash assistance and children's toys over the holidays.

We have also received assistance in putting together the shed originally located on the Cloverdale property. For the cost of only about \$1200 (reimbursable through the ESG grant), we were able to finish the metal siding, put in a floor, sheetrock, paint, install electrical outlets, add shelving, create a sidewalk and roof, and build shelving and counters. We have now moved the freezer in to the building, and have storage space plus a highly functional, and functioning, community food pantry.

We have continued to partner with JobsPlus and other resources, and have continued to be successful in assisting our clients as they move back into self-sufficiency. Three persons started work this week, all with good jobs bringing a living wage and benefits. North Florida Legal Services gave a workshop for 20 of our residents regarding fair housing and tenant rights and responsibilities. We continue to offer workshops on budgeting, shelter living, dealing with trauma, and parenting on a weekly or biweekly basis. We hosted the Democratic Women's Club, and got offers from grandmothers to provide a story time for the younger residents of our community, along with tutoring and mentoring services. CC continues to do a magnificent job managing this facility. I did bring in a temporary staff member to help with the shelter and HPRP file organization. This allowed CC to take a few days off, is allowing Lydia to take a few days off, and helped get us in good shape for the audit.

Another bright light was the birth of a baby to a mother staying at the facility. Mother and son are healthy and doing well.

HUD/ HMIS

We received the HUD contract the last week of October. This, plus the receipt of HPRP funds the same week, plus Challenge grant funds in November, allowed us to select and purchase an HMIS system. The selection occurred just prior to the last BOD meeting, along with contract negotiation and the first payment. From the end of November to December 18, we worked with the vendor to customize the system for our local needs, train our administrators, set up our staff with licenses and log-ins, and go over the demonstration modules. Staff review of initial demos resulted in further customization, meaning that we did not actually start inputting live data until December 18. Even then we discovered various glitches in the software system, which needed to be corrected before we could go further. As noted, eventually we did input all our clients, and generated an accurate and complete report.

The next step is to engage other providers in HMIS. We have selected our first set of five new providers, and are finishing the customization of the programs so as to be most useful for each of them. We will be training a class of fifteen (three staff members from each provider) in early February. The first training will include Children in Crisis, FRESH Start, Catholic Charities, S4P Synergy, and Bridgeway Center. Additional providers have also begun providing the information necessary to go on-line, and we expect to train another five in March. We expect 20 providers outside Opportunity, Inc. to be on-line by June 30.

The HMIS system has been a long time coming, but is proving an effective tool for us, and should prove even more effective as more providers come on line. We are now in the process of ordering scanners and bar code equipment, to allow for the card swipe system to be reinitiated in an efficient and effective form.

Challenge Grant:

We disbursed over half of our first draw of \$48,000 following the first two rounds of invoice receipts, and expect that most of the rest will have been spent by the next set of receipts. I will request our next draw as I turn in our next report – please get reports in on a timely basis, as our Challenge Grant cash flow depends upon it.

Department of Health:

We have started surveying individuals in the census tracts showing the highest rate of uninsured citizens, and will finish this up this week. These surveys are designed for use with a scanning machine, making this a much simpler process to evaluate than the point-in-time surveys.

HHAG (Children in Crisis) Grant:

The Florida Board of Regents met January 15, and approved the use of Children in Crisis land for construction of the teen transition home. I am on call daily waiting to run to Pensacola to get this contract started, so that we can begin funding the work already ongoing at Children in Crisis.

Administrative Move:

We are very happy!

Community Awareness

In December, CC and I went on a non-stop tour of agencies and organizations, including the Rotary Club, interested in the shelter during the holidays. We had an excellent turn-out for the Open House, with approximately 200 persons stopping by during the day. On January 21 the Democratic Women's Club came to Opportunity Place, and filled our main building to overflowing. Christmas Eve the newspaper ran an excellent and touching story about one of our residents and her newborn baby, which generated a great deal of interest. An article is scheduled for Sunday, January 31, which I hope is also well-received. Tuesday a reporter is going with us to visit the Muscogee Creek Nation. We cannot complain about press attention!

We are getting about 800 hits per week on the website, and the number of website subscribers (i.e., people who get Constant Contact updates) has increased to about 150. CC is going to speak at the Unitarian Church on February 28, while I am at the Trinity United Methodist Church on February 17.

Personnel Shifts:

The stress involved with getting out the HPRP and other reports at the end of December/ first of January ended with the dismissal of one employee who could not manage the HMIS system, and the resignation of another who cited the stress of the last few weeks as her reason for leaving. Fortunately, we were able to immediately replace both staff members with young women of exceptional quality. Anita Ferrel just received her bachelor's of social work degree from UWF, and is working in the mornings at the office with me, and the afternoons as assistant case manager with Keli in Crestview. Stephanie Yelverton just received her degree in art history from UF, but has office manager experience and is very bright and motivated. She works at Opportunity Place in the morning, and with me in the afternoon. She came recommended by Ann Peoples. Both women are comfortable with computers, and do not find any of our programs in the least bit daunting. They have begun HMIS data entry on their shifts with me, and find it self-explanatory and easy. It is my hope that by dividing up the office/ data entry job into two shifts, and having each young woman spend a portion of her time engaged with clients, that we will manage to get the necessary grunt work done while keeping our staff focused on why we do what we do. They should also reduce the stress levels for Keli, CC and Lydia, and should free up some time among our senior staff members.

Although it has been only a short while since they have been employed, the rest of the staff is very impressed. Stephanie assembled all 12 of the board room chairs in one morning. All the chairs were in use during the audit, and all proved stable.

As always, I cannot emphasize enough the amazing and dedicated efforts of our on-going staff, Lydia Barton, CC Fearson and Keli Cummings. All go far more than an extra mile – they encompass the earth with the heart and spirit. We can never be grateful enough.

Meeting Dates:

The next meeting will be held March 1, 3:30 p.m., at the Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. We will be having a guest from the VA, so please join us to learn of new initiatives to help our veterans.

- Lenore Wilson