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## While Some Steps Have Been Taken, Office on Homelessness Needs to Enhance Efforts to Assist the Homeless Population Within the State

### *at a glance*

While Florida continues to do well on a statewide basis in obtaining dedicated federal funding for the homeless, many local providers of homeless services continue to receive less than their pro-rata share of federal grants. The State Office on Homelessness has taken steps to address this concern, but needs to continue its efforts. The office also needs to continue to develop and disseminate guidelines for helping homeless persons access and enroll in mainstream programs, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and food stamps. Progress has been made at the state and local level in developing discharge planning processes to help prevent inmates, persons receiving mental health services, and children leaving foster care from becoming homeless.

### Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Children and Families' Office on Homelessness, in response to a 2005 OPPAGA report.<sup>1, 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Section 11.51(6), F.S.

<sup>2</sup> *Economic Impact of Homelessness Is Significant; Improvements Needed at State and Local Levels*, [OPPAGA Report No. 05-01](#).

### Background

Homelessness is a chronic problem in Florida. In 2005, Florida's homeless population was estimated to be over 83,300 persons on any particular day.<sup>3, 4</sup> The homeless include families, veterans, senior citizens, and youth. People become homeless for many reasons, including poverty, lack of affordable housing and transportation, unemployment, illness, and divorce. Homeless individuals also frequently suffer from substance abuse and mental illness.

Some areas of the state hit by hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 experienced increases in their homeless populations. Florida also received thousands of evacuees from neighboring states from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, placing pressure on an already taxed housing supply.

Financial assistance to the homeless comes from all levels of government, faith-based organizations, and private and nonprofit entities. Homeless individuals typically receive services at the local level through a network of service

January 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Florida law defines a homeless person as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night time residence or someone whose primary nighttime residence is a shelter, an institution, or a public or private place not designed for regular sleeping accommodations.

<sup>4</sup> *Annual Report on Homeless Conditions in Florida, 2005*, Florida Office on Homelessness.

providers that offer shelters, food and clothing banks, and mental health and substance abuse treatment centers. These organizations aid the homeless in securing housing, employment, and health and treatment services.

State Office on Homelessness. At the state level, the Department of Children and Families' Office on Homelessness serves as the central point of contact on homeless issues and coordinates state agencies and programs that serve the homeless or persons at risk of becoming homeless.<sup>5</sup> The office also administers state-funded grant programs to assist local homeless coalitions.

Local homeless coalitions. Homeless coalitions are organizations that coordinate the delivery of services to the homeless at the local level. Members include mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, county health departments, food and shelter providers, law enforcement units, regional workforce boards, public housing authorities, school districts, and county and municipal governments. Homeless coalitions must establish continuum of care plans to be eligible to apply for federal homeless grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other grants administered by the State Office on Homelessness.

Council on Homelessness. The Council on Homelessness is a 15-member panel that is responsible for developing policies to reduce homelessness in the state and advising the State Office on Homelessness. The council annually prepares a report to the Governor and Legislature recommending actions that can help reduce homelessness in Florida.

Our 2005 report concluded that improvements were needed to

- help local homeless coalitions receive their pro-rata amount of dedicated federal funding;
- provide better guidance for helping homeless persons apply for mainstream program services and benefits;<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2001-98, *Laws of Florida*, created the Office on Homelessness and the Council on Homelessness.

<sup>6</sup> Mainstream programs are those that provide various forms of financial, health, and social support services designed to remedy

- encourage local service providers to use computerized systems to share information regarding homeless persons; and
- enhance discharge planning to help prevent individuals leaving institutions and other forms of care from becoming homeless.

## Current Status

### *Some local homeless coalitions still experiencing difficulty obtaining their pro-rata share of federal funds*

As we recommended in our 2005 report, the State Office on Homelessness has provided assistance to local coalitions that have experienced difficulty obtaining their pro-rata share of HUD funding.<sup>7</sup> The office's efforts include

- partnering unsuccessful coalitions with ones that do well in obtaining HUD funding and
- offering direct support to low-performing coalitions.

However, while Florida continues to do well statewide in obtaining more than its pro-rata amount of dedicated federal homeless funding from HUD (see Exhibit 1), some local coalitions are still not receiving their pro-rata share. In 2005, 10 of the 27 coalitions did not receive their full pro-rata amount of federal funds compared to 6 coalitions in 2004.

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the disabling conditions and other problems that prevent homeless individuals from becoming healthy and living as self-sufficiently as possible in permanent, stable housing. These programs, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, and food stamps, are intended to help lower income people and are not dedicated to serving homeless individuals.

<sup>7</sup> As part of its competitive grant process, HUD initially estimates a "pro-rata need," which is the dollar expression of relative homeless assistance needs it assigns to each community or groups of communities using U.S. Census Bureau data. HUD may award a community funding that exceeds its pro-rata amount if the community's continuum of care entity submits a funding application that meets HUD's grant award criteria, such as providing permanent housing for disabled adults; clearly identifies a priority need and includes documentation showing how a proposed project would eliminate or substantially decrease the need; and requests renewal funding for projects that were funded in previous years. Coalitions may receive less than their pro-rata amount if HUD determines that their funding applications do not adequately address grant award criteria or if the coalition does not seek renewal funding for its projects.

**Exhibit 1****Florida Received More Than Its Pro-Rata Amount of Federal Funding From Federal Fiscal Years 2001 to 2005**

	Federal Fiscal Year				
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Award Amount	\$48,692,766	\$41,239,338	\$51,396,280	\$59,060,266	\$58,053,746
Pro-Rata Amount	37,106,859	37,416,000	37,416,000	40,297,178	39,763,457
<b>Difference</b>	<b>\$11,585,907</b>	<b>\$ 3,823,338</b>	<b>\$13,980,280</b>	<b>\$18,763,088</b>	<b>\$18,290,289</b>

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Coalitions received less than their pro-rata amount because they submitted plans that did not conform with HUD standards relating to construction of permanent housing, submitted applications that contained errors or included activities that were ineligible for funding, or failed to apply for funding.

We continue to recommend that the Office on Homelessness assist local coalitions experiencing difficulty in receiving their pro-rata amount of dedicated federal funding.

***More guidance needed on helping homeless persons access mainstream program benefits***

The State Office on Homelessness has not fully implemented our recommendation that it develop and disseminate guidelines for helping homeless persons access mainstream programs. Instead, it is promoting a HUD pilot program that is intended to improve homeless persons' access to federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. Under the pilot program, which is being implemented in Broward County, community service provider employees are being trained in how to help homeless persons obtain SSI and SSDI benefits. State Office on Homelessness managers report the office will promote this program at a statewide conference to be held in August 2006. The office plans to identify additional homeless coalitions interested in implementing the pilot program at this conference.

However, the office has not developed and disseminated guidelines for helping homeless persons access and enroll in other mainstream programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, and food stamps. We continue to recommend that the State Office on Homelessness develop and disseminate guidelines for these programs.

***More local coalitions using Homeless Management Information System***

Consistent with our 2005 report's recommendation, the State Office on Homelessness has required local service providers to use the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to track services provided to the homeless in order to qualify for state homeless grants. The office reports that more service providers are using HMIS since it implemented this requirement in 2005. For example, the Office on Homelessness reports that 65.3% of all beds at facilities housing homeless persons in the state are presently accounted for in the system compared to 57% in 2005.<sup>8</sup>

***Steps have been taken to improve discharge planning***

Some actions have been taken that address our recommendation that discharge plans be developed to help prevent individuals leaving institutions and other forms of state care from becoming homeless.

<sup>8</sup> Some local programs serving homeless persons do not participate in HMIS because they are not receiving state grants. Also, facilities that maintain confidential information on homeless persons, such as battered women's shelters, are exempted from the requirement.

At the state level, the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Corrections entered into a Memorandum of Understanding in April 2006 that calls for the agencies to develop discharge plans for prison inmates to reduce the incidence of homelessness among released inmates. The departments will coordinate efforts to provide training to their staff on how to better document inmate disabilities, which will help inmates apply for programs services prior to their release from prison.

At the local level, some coalitions are developing discharge planning protocols to help individuals exiting foster care and mental health care from becoming homeless. These protocols establish a process for transferring these individuals into a community's network of service providers. The Office on Homelessness reported that 17 of 27 local coalitions have developed mental health discharge planning protocols while the remaining 10 are developing such protocols. The office also reported that 17 of 27 homeless coalitions have developed discharge planning protocols for children leaving foster care. The State Office on Homelessness should monitor the implementation of these protocols and report on their success in its annual report on homeless conditions in Florida.

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