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Contact: Kristine Kappel
Phone: 312-655-7019 or 773-718-8467 (cell)
E-mail: kkappel@catholiccharities.net

First of Its Kind Study Finds Homeless Prevention Programs Dramatically Decrease Likelihood of Families Entering Shelters

Groundbreaking Study with Catholic Charities, University of Notre Dame, and All Chicago Reveals that Funding to Homeless Prevention Services Greatly Reduces Homelessness

Chicago, IL – On any given night more than 6,700 Chicagoans find themselves without a home or shelter bed. How they become homeless varies widely, but one thing is now certain: homeless prevention programs and funding dramatically decrease the chances they will end up on the streets.

In a groundbreaking new study out Friday, the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities at the University of Notre Dame reveals that when homeless prevention funds are available, an individual’s chance of becoming homeless within 6 months is reduced by 65 percent. The study, done in partnership with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago and All Chicago, is the first of its kind in the nation. Historically, homeless initiatives have focused on providing housing and services to those who are already homeless through emergency shelters and transitional housing. Recently there has been a nationwide movement at policies focused on homeless prevention – ensuring individuals and families avoid having to call a shelter home.

Nearly every major city, including Chicago, runs a homeless prevention hotline that helps those facing homelessness find financial assistance. Despite the large number of programs and more than 15 million people calling for these services nationwide every year, little has been done to understand their impact on homeless.

“It is very common for nonprofit and government agencies to provide financial assistance to prevent homelessness. And yet, until now, we really did not know what effect this assistance had,” said James Sullivan, one of the study authors. “This is the first study that examines the direct impact of financial assistance on homelessness. By comparing the shelter entry rates for those who call when funding is available to the rates for those who call when funding is not available, we were able to show that financial assistance makes a big difference.”

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In Chicago, the Homelessness Prevention Call Center (HPCC), which is administered by Catholic Charities, connects those at risk of homelessness with the dozens of local agencies that provide temporary financial assistance to address their needs. At any given time, funding may or may not be available. This is because funding comes from a variety of sources including federal, state and city grants and private foundations, to the agencies that administer it. New funds are being made available and existing funding streams are halted periodically throughout the year. Essentially, an individual could call the HPCC on a Monday and there could be no funding available for their circumstances and background and call on Wednesday and funding could then be available because an organization received a new funding stream. The HPCC funding availability is updated daily.

The study linked information gathered from the call center with the Homeless Management Information System database managed by All Chicago. By combining this data, callers were tracked to determine if or when they entered a shelter and if they had received financial assistance to prevent homelessness. Results showed that those callers who received funding were less likely to enter a shelter within 6 months. Of particular significance:

- Those calling when funds are available are 65 percent less likely to enter a shelter within 6 months
- Those calling when funds are available spend 2.1 fewer days in a shelter over a 6 month period
- Callers with especially low incomes (those with incomes below $750 per month) who call when funds are available are 80 percent less likely to enter a shelter

“It can be costly to prevent a family from becoming homeless,” said Monsignor Michael Boland, President of Catholic Charities. “However, we know that the long-term costs to society are much greater when a family becomes homeless, including children doing poorly in school and a greater likelihood that family members end up in the emergency room.”

“Funding to homeless prevention services has decreased in recent years. However, this study shows that when we invest a small amount in individuals and families who face the threat of losing their home, we are able to prevent families from facing an unnecessary crisis,” said Nonie Brennan, CEO of All Chicago.

About Catholic Charities

Helping people in need for more than 98 years, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago is one of the largest private, not-for-profit social service agencies in the Midwest, annually assisting more than 1 million people in Cook and Lake counties without regard to religious, ethnic or economic background. Catholic Charities fulfills the Church’s role in the mission of charity by providing compassionate, competent, professional services that strengthen and support individuals, families and communities.

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