

EarthLinks at the Roots: What's Being Done about Homelessness?

Denver's Road Home has engaged the City and County of Denver to end homelessness by 2015. This program, initiated by Denver's former Mayor Hickenlooper, partners with the Denver City Council, Mile High United Way, the non-profit community, various foundations, the private sector, faith based organizations, and the homeless community, in order to maximize resources meet their goal in a holistic way.



According to DRH's plans, the following areas involve the most attention to truly end homelessness:

SERVICES:

Availability and usefulness of services is huge. Many individuals lack access to resources because they don't know they exist. Others struggle between lottery systems and waiting lists to even receive services because the providers are so overbooked. DRH helps connect individuals with numerous services that will help to transition them out of homelessness- such as getting proper identification paperwork or providing substance abuse rehabilitation- as well as services that every human being deserves but may not be able to afford- such as health care or food.

HOUSING:

DRH has adopted a "housing first" approach to addressing homelessness. The mission is to find or create for these individuals transitional, permanent, and/or affordable housing options. The Denver's Road Home does not provide individuals with purely free housing, but does work with individuals to find a plan of housing stability. DRH works with housing managers as well to aid individuals in their new accommodations. People who live in DRH sponsored housing also have access to an array of useful resources for getting back on their feet and staying that way.

SHELTER SYSTEM:

Shelters are a vital resource for individuals who have no other



option but sleeping on the streets and, especially during severe weather, people would not be able to manage without them. That said there are some challenges with the shelter system.

For one, many shelters often work either at or above capacity, and -especially during inclement weather- individuals may end up sleeping on mats in an overflow section instead of having a bed.

Another consideration is regulations or restrictions that shelters have in place. Many shelters only provide space for a certain gender, some require that the individual stay sober, others have religious affiliations, and quite a few try to avoid pets. Nearly all shelters also require the treatment of contagious medical concerns before allowing individuals to stay the night. Though there are legitimate reasons for many of these regulations, they may act as barriers for some people seeking shelter.



When looking towards providing an end to homelessness, one needs to consider that individuals need more than just a place to sleep, but an actual home. Though shelters provide temporary relief, a more comprehensive approach to providing relief from homelessness is necessary. For that reason, DRH aims to provide some more beds for shelters for the short term, but solve the long term problem through moving people from shelters to actual housing. The goal is to provide more housing solutions as opposed to expanding shelters.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS AND COORDINATED RESPONSE:

The goal of community awareness is to ensure that the general public has a better understanding of homelessness in order to break stereotypes about homelessness and start creating solutions together. This also involves advocating for homeless individuals in the media as well as encouraging others to show their support on personal, community, and governmental levels.

ZONING/URBAN DESIGN/LAND USE:

The key to zoning accomplishments is involving neighborhoods in comprehensive solutions that would aid in building mixed-income housing with community support. DRH also aims to build this low-income housing in a variety of zones of differing income levels instead of keeping all of the low-income housing in one particular area.

PREVENTION:

The prevention program focuses on helping homeowners and renters who are at risk of being homeless avoid eviction, foreclosure, and utility shut-off. The idea is that one of the best ways to end homelessness is to stop it at its source rather than just focusing on those who are already homeless.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND OUTREACH:

DRH is committed to the safety and welfare of people living on the streets, but laws often are not in favor of people who are homeless. For example, there can be legal repercussions for panhandling and loitering, both of which –perhaps unintentionally- discriminate against those who may have nowhere else to turn.

DRH has been working with law enforcement officers and non-profit organizations to:

- 1) Prevent individuals from turning to those courses of action
- 2) Provide an alternative to arrest should police encounter individuals engaging in illegal activities that are a result of their desperate situation
- 3) Find ways to connect individuals on the streets to resources that will get them out of their situation as opposed to supporting panhandling and loitering



The results:

- 1) Eighteen months after strong campaigning on the issues through the Give a Better Way and Donation Meter Campaign, a 92% drop in panhandling in downtown Denver was reported by the Downtown Denver Partnership.
- 2) The number of incarcerations in the County Jail of individuals who are homeless has declined by 22%.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND TRAINING:

With the difficulties in the economy, there is more and more emphasis on what your skills and education are during the hiring process. In addition, many people have become unemployed due to companies making extensive budget cuts or going out of business. A loss of job is one of the main causes of homelessness and people who are unable to be competitive in the current market struggle with finding a way out of homelessness. Thankfully, many non-profit organizations from the Women's Bean Project, Center for Work Education and Employment, Centro Humanitario, Work Options for Women, EarthLinks, and others have found ways to help people receive job training, resume assistance, GED tutoring, and other job readiness skills in order to give people an opportunity to succeed in the job market.

Another aspect of education is providing courses/information to those who serve/employ the homeless community of Denver so that all parties can understand what to expect from each other and how they can best support each other.

Where does EarthLinks fit in?

EarthLinks has a unique position within these various target areas. EarthLinks provides individuals a safe space to be where they can cultivate a supportive community, access healthy food, build confidence, set and work toward achieving goals, earn a paycheck, and –though EarthLinks isn't strictly a job training program- learn valuable job readiness information (such as being on time for work, sewing/production skills, and collaboration). Those aspects of **service** and **employment/training** are also coupled with **community awareness and response** as more people purchase EarthLinks products and understand the people we serve and what we are doing to help. Those who do purchase our products also help to continue the work we do, as well as often become volunteers themselves. With this blog, our CommunityLinks events, and other outreach materials we produce, we are also aiming to educate the Denver community on the issues of homelessness.



If you are still interested in researching Denver's Road Home, please visit:

<http://www.denversroadhome.org/>.

